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HITO — RANDOM

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H I T O — R A N D O M





“Decent
setup,
but your
punchline
sucked
ASS.”

➡ Nagase Iori

➡ Inaba Himeko

➡ Yaegashi Taichi

“I’m tellin’ ya,
me and Yui
**SWITCHED
BODIES!**
Just like
in a manga—
aack!”

➡ Kiriyama Yui

➡ Aoki Yoshifumi

DAY
1



This meant they needed a few seconds to recover from the surprise. And the girls of the CRC knew exactly what that meant.

DAY
16

The two idiots were more hyped than ever. But this carelessness was their downfall. For right then, the door opened.



“With the way things are going,
no one will be able to tell it’s me,
not even myself... and then...
eventually I think I’m just going to disappear completely!”

DAY
17

She had put up so many walls,
her entire world was now nothing but walls.
And right when it was falling apart,
here came a giant earthquake in the form of the body-swap,
threatening to bring it all crashing down for good.
Think!
What could he do for her?

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Chapter 1: By The Time We Realized, It Had Already Begun](#)

[Chapter 2: B_____](#)

[Chapter 3: Definition of “Fascinating”](#)

[Chapter 4: Bonds and Bombshells \(One Week Later\)](#)

[Chapter 5: Soliloquy of a Jobber](#)

[Chapter 6: Low Blow](#)

[Chapter 7: Conclude and Begin Anew](#)

[Chapter 8: Born That Way](#)

[Chapter 9: In Love and Death](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Chapter 1: By The Time We Realized, It Had Already Begun

September—the month in which the vast majority of Japanese high school students are dislodged from the surreal fantasy that is summer vacation and promptly sent hurtling back into the real world. And for the most part, the students of Yamaboshi High School were no exception.

Situated in a rapidly-growing suburban city, Yamaboshi offered a more relaxed learning environment while maintaining a proven track record of graduates each year.

But the start of September was when the annual Culture Festival took place, and as a result, a certain lighthearted vibe would persist throughout the school until the festivities had ended. Then, mid-month, when the last lingering traces of the event finally faded, Yamaboshi High School would return to business as usual, *i.e.* the same cheerful, lively antics you'd expect from any other school.

Yaegashi Taichi was one of many students who enjoyed this casual environment.

Or at least, he should have been.

After successfully surviving all the way through sixth period without falling asleep once, Taichi's next task for the day was to clean the restrooms with the rest of his assigned group. After that, his destination would be the clubroom.

He stepped out of Class 1-C, located in the East Wing, then traveled through the North Wing to the four-story Rec Hall, a rickety building that needed some serious earthquake retrofitting before it fell apart—or so the rumor mill liked to claim.

Taichi's clubroom was located on the top floor. Naturally, the Rec Hall wasn't outfitted with an elevator, so his only option was a long climb up the stairs.

Yes, the fourth floor was home to the Cultural Research Club, or CRC for short.

They had been saddled with the school's least popular location—undesirable only because lazy teenagers cared about avoiding stairs more than natural light or a nice view—for good reason: their club was only recently established this year, and by a group of five first-year students at that.

In other words, they were the lowest rung on the ladder.

The name “Cultural Research Club” would indicate they spent their days exhaustively documenting traditions from every corner of the world... on paper, anyway.

By the time Taichi arrived at the fourth floor, he was a bit out of breath. There, taped to the door of room 401, was a single sheet of A4-size printer paper bearing the words CULTURAL RESEARCH CLUB.

Taichi grabbed the handle and opened the door. A cool breeze blew in from the open window, brushing against his cheek and ruffling his hair. The fourth floor was rather airy and light, which made for many a pleasant afternoon.

Then he noticed that one person had arrived ahead of him. In the center of the room sat two long desks positioned side-by-side. There, at one corner, sat Inaba Himeko, vice president of the CRC, typing away in front of a laptop.

“Whoa... Are you the only one here?”

“Congrats, your eyes work,” Inaba answered flatly without so much as a glance in his direction. For a girl, her voice was rather deep and commanding.

Taichi took a seat in the folding chair across the table from her. Then, finally, she looked up at him for the first time. Her glossy, jet-black hair hung straight to her shoulders, not a single strand out of place—the sort of style that would look great paired with a kimono, Taichi liked to imagine.

Her large, almond-shaped eyes and ridiculously long eyelashes afforded her an air of mystery unbefitting of her youth. At first glance, she looked far too mature for a first-year high school student. Coupled with her aloof personality, it made her virtually unapproachable.

“Got a topic ready for your article in this month's issue of the Culture Bulletin?”

“Yep! Now I just need to make sure it meets the length requirements and give it a quick editing pass. So you know, it’s titled ‘A History of Pro Wrestling As Depicted Through Styles of Brainbuster.’ See, in Japan a brainbuster is normally done by slamming the opponent on their back, but originally the move was performed by dropping them on their head—”

“Zip it.”

“You’re the one who asked!”

“All I wanted to know was whether you had a topic, yes or no. I never asked you to go into detail about it. Frankly, I couldn’t care less.”

“Man, do you always have to be so blunt? Like, would it kill you to try phrasing things a little nicer? Starting now?”

Sitting down, the two of them were at an even eye level. Considering Taichi was of average height for a guy his age, one might deduce that Inaba’s sitting height was above average, but this was not the case. Rather, it was her impeccable sitting posture that afforded her the extra stature. She sat up so straight, Taichi often wondered if she was smuggling steel rebar under her uniform. That said, Inaba was indeed tall and leggy for the average high school girl. Her body type was perhaps best described as slim and angular.

Just then, the door opened with a bang, and a cheerful voice rang out.

“Sup, guys! Sorry I’m late!” A dazzling smile lit up the room, radiating warmth to all four corners. That single smile was all it took to make Taichi feel fuzzy inside. “Wait, huh? Is it just the two of you in here?” The president of the CRC, Nagase Iori, tilted her head as she spoke.

As it happened, Taichi, Nagase, and Inaba were all fellow classmates in Class 1-C.

“Aw, rats... I ran all the way up those stairs for nothing...”

As she grumbled, Nagase threw herself down onto the black three-seater sofa positioned on the far side of the room. Shifting onto one side, she propped her head up and sprawled her legs wide like she was a middle-aged man wasting his weekend watching TV. Her breathing was notably relaxed for someone who claimed to have just run up four flights of stairs.

“Iori, watch your skirt. We can see your bike shorts,” Inaba pointed out dryly.

“And? Who cares!” Nagase replied, knowingly flaunting her perfect, slender legs. She patted her thighs, seemingly unconcerned with what might have been on display.

“You do realize I’m here too, right?” Taichi asked.

“It’ll cost ya. 120 yen per peek, chump.”

“I have to pay?! Although... that’s actually a pretty reasonable price...”

“Taichi! I know you’re joking, but that’s the kind of thing a literal sex offender would say. Cool your jets,” Inaba retorted.

Nagase snickered and sat upright. She was a pretty girl, with large, bright eyes, a well-defined nose, and a slightly round face. Her porcelain skin was clear and healthy, without a trace of makeup to be seen, and her dark, silky shoulder-length hair was tied up in a lazy ponytail. Her style was plain and practical, but this actually seemed to work in her favor, bringing out her natural innocent charm.

“Changing the subject, Nagase, what are you doing for your next article?” Taichi asked.

“Hmmm... To be honest, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about what the Culture Bulletin is really missing, you know?”

“And?”

“Here’s my professional opinion: Inaban’s got us covered on the scandals, but we’ve got ourselves a dire lack of sex, drugs, and rock n’ roll.”

“Nobody is looking at the Culture Bulletin like it’s some goddamn gossip rag! And we’re not supposed to cover scandals in the first place!”

In the previous issue of the Culture Bulletin, the “Culture Festival Special Edition,” Inaba had published an article regarding two teachers that had entered a more-than-coworkers sort of relationship. (She casually failed to mention how she obtained this information.) In the end, this year’s Culture Festival saw the Bulletin rise to unexpected public acclaim, gaining far more attention than any of the scheduled events, helping to spread a festive mood

throughout the school, and eventually resulting in said teachers publicly acknowledging their feelings for each other during the bonfire dance.

At that point, the cheer was contagious; the two teachers had the blessing of the entire student body and the rest of the faculty. This was all well and good, of course, but over time the entire school grew painfully aware of how supremely awkward it would be if they were to break up after all that—a fear that continued to persist to this day.

“That kinda thing is for festivals only. As it stands, I have no plans to publish that kind of stuff on the regular. I mean, you know me. I hate divulging info as it is! Only in moderation, you get me?”

Inaba Himeko’s two favorite hobbies were information gathering and analysis. She was not, however, keen on sharing her findings with others. As for what she did with that information, Taichi was dying to know.

“Okay, fine. With ‘moderation’ in mind... I say we try for something sexy this time around!” Nagase declared, pointing her index finger in the air.

“I can’t write something like that! I’m a delicate flower!” Inaba shot back, looking neither delicate nor flowery.

“No, no. I’ll write the article. All I need you to do is pose for a couple of racy photos—”

“Hell no! Why the hell should I give these dudes more material for their spank banks?!”

“Inaba, I gotta admit, I’m a little concerned what sort of photos you’re imagining we can get away with printing in a school-sanctioned newspaper,” Taichi muttered, knowing they probably weren’t listening.

Judging from her reaction, she must have jumped straight to an X-rated conclusion. Delicate flower, indeed.

“I mean, c’mon, Iori. You’re the pretty one here! Don’t you think you’re the one who oughta do it?” Inaba asked, as though she’d just hit upon a genius idea.

“Non, non! I’m the girl-next-door type. Nobody wants to see me naked! I

might be cute, but when it comes to raw sex appeal, that's all you, Inaban."

"Oh god... They're already assuming they have to get naked for this..."

While Nagase's unpretentious style suggested she didn't care for her appearance, it turned out she actually had a solid understanding of her own strengths. Perhaps her no-makeup policy was actually a calculated choice in order to make her stand out from the crowd...

Realistically, though, she probably just didn't care.

"I get where you're coming from, I really do... That said, I can't imagine guys our age give a shit about sex appeal. Ask any dude you know and he'd probably say he prefers the sweet and innocent type," Inaba argued.

"No way. Teenage boys in our generation are all about sophisticated seduction. That's what my gut tells me."

"Your gut. Right," Taichi muttered under his breath.

At that, the two girls whirled around to face him.

"Aha! Come to think of it, we have one such teenage boy right here! Taichi, which would you prefer?" Inaba asked.

"Yeah, Taichi! If you had to choose, who would you rather see naked, me or Inaban?"

What a loaded question.

But Taichi knew he had no choice but to give them some kind of answer. He closed his eyes for a moment to ponder it, then said: "Well, if I'm being asked to represent the entire male population here at Yamaboshi High, the answer would be 'both'—"

"'3:55 PM: Yaegashi Taichi ordered two female club members to take off their clothing.' Did you get all of that, Inaban?" Nagase cut in.

"Of course. Now we have the perfect editorial note for this month's issue."

Inaba smirked as her fingers flew across the keyboard.

"W-Well, I can't exactly argue when I did technically say it..."

Taichi slumped his shoulders in defeat. He knew he couldn't win against them,

no matter how hard he tried... Sadly, there was no beating the established power structure in the CRC.

Thirty minutes ticked by as Nagase read some manga, Inaba continued to work on her laptop, and Taichi studied for the next day's lesson. There was supposed to be a scheduled club meeting today, but the last two members had yet to show up.

Taichi's pen fell still.

"Come to think of it... Aoki was acting kinda weird in gym class earlier today..." he muttered to himself, not expecting much in the way of a response. Unlike Taichi, Aoki was in Class 1-A, but that didn't mean they never saw each other; classes 1-A and 1-C shared a joint gym class.

Inaba straightened up and shot Taichi a questioning look.

"Now that you mention it, Yui wasn't acting like herself at all, either."

"Yeah? Do you think something's going on with them? Maybe Aoki's aggressive courting finally paid off or something?"

"Hah! No, that can't be it. The way things stand, those two will never get together. Not until that dipshit realizes where he's going wrong."

At that, the door quietly slid open, and the subjects of their conversation stumbled into the room: Aoki Yoshifumi and Kiriya Yui.

Aoki was a lanky youth with medium-length wavy hair. Personality-wise, he was either a laid-back, easygoing dork or a brainless moron, depending on how you looked at him.

Kiriya wore her hair long—shiny brown strands that could sometimes look red under the right light, though it was her natural color. Beneath her shapely brows sat a pair of defiant, upturned eyes. Though she was petite in stature, her body was far from undeveloped; her muscular limbs hinted at a regular exercise routine and gave her an air of vibrant energy.

As one might expect at first glance, the two of them were fairly cheerful people... usually. And yet, for some reason, today the two seemed completely

miserable—exhausted, even.

Taichi, Nagase, and Inaba all moved to one side of the table as Aoki and Kiriya took their seats on the other side. They sat there, silent and pale, occasionally shooting each other furtive glances.

“So, uh... What’s... going on with you two?” Nagase asked, taking the initiative to break the oppressive silence.

“Well, uh... I mean, I do wanna tell ya, but I’m kinda not sure how...” Aoki replied hesitantly, scratching his head. He typically wore his uniform a little loosely, but today he was a downright mess.

Next to him, Kiriya was staring down at the corner of the table, absently playing with a lock of her hair.

“Seriously, guys, what happened? I can tell something’s on your mind, so just talk to us about it. Let us help you,” Taichi urged.

“Thanks, dude. For real. Okay, here we go. I’m gonna explain everything. It’s just... We both agreed we were gonna tell you, but now that we’re here, it’s kinda scary... Seriously though, it takes a lot of guts to tell you what I’m about to—”

“Just spit it out already!” Inaba snapped, interrupting him.

“R-Right!” Aoki squeaked, nodding.

Inaba had no patience for shenanigans.

Aoki took a deep breath, then looked over at Kiriya for confirmation.

Kiriya grimaced and nodded.

With her blessing, Aoki began to speak.

“Alright guys, the truth is, last night...”

The room went dead silent as everyone waited with bated breath. Aoki let the silence hang in the air for a moment... Then, finally, he screamed— “WE SWITCHED BODIES!”

“What?” Inaba and Taichi asked in unison.

“Hahahaha... Huh?” Nagase faltered.

The three of them were completely baffled.

“I’m tellin’ ya, me and Yui switched bodies! Just like in a manga—aack!”

“Oho! Nice karate chop!” Taichi remarked, genuinely impressed at the speed and accuracy with which Inaba dealt Aoki his punishment.

“Wh-What the heck was that for, Inabacchan?!”

“Decent setup, but your punchline sucked ass.”

“No! I swear, it’s not a joke! I’m like, totally dead serious here, dude!”

“Honestly, I’m more stunned by the fact that Inaba’s willing to hit people who make bad jokes,” Taichi mused aloud.

“So, if you guys swapped bodies, then does that mean you’re actually Yui? You still look and sound as dumb as ever, though.”

“Swapped bodies, as in PAST TENSE! We’re back to normal now! And Iori-chan, could you maybe not gut me like that?! Didn’t anyone ever teach you that matter-of-fact comments hurt the most?!”

Using wide, exaggerated gestures, Aoki recounted his tale of trading bodies with Kiriya, desperate to convince them he was telling the truth. It was clear he wasn’t joking, but everything he said was so preposterous, it left Taichi and the others at a complete loss.

“Alright, alright, that’s enough from you... Good grief. Yui, do you have anything you’d like to say regarding Aoki’s claim?” an annoyed Inaba asked Kiriya, who had yet to say a single word on the subject.

Kiriya stared at the ground, clutching at her hair, and shook her head. The chestnut-colored strands grew more and more frazzled with her agitation until finally she opened her mouth to speak.

“...He has to be lying. That can’t have been real. I mean, it totally doesn’t make sense. I was Aoki, and he was me? Yeah, no way. There’s like no way!” Her voice grew louder and louder until eventually she jumped to her feet. “I’m telling you, it was all just a bad dream!” Then she shifted into a fighting stance that would’ve looked right at home on the cover of *Street Fighter*. “I don’t believe in paranormal stuff! There’s nothing good ol’ science can’t explain! Yes,

I've made my decision... Aoki! Leave me out of your creepy fantasies! Body swapping? Hah! That trope fell out of fashion years ago!"

"Are... Are you seriously turnin' on me right now?! Didn't we just agree it was real life?!"

"It was... temporary insanity! I can't be held accountable for my actions!"

"I don't exactly follow, but I do get the feeling this is an incredibly dramatic betrayal," Taichi remarked, knowing his comment was unnecessary.

"You seriously think that was just a dream?!"

"You're darn right I do! It was just an overly lifelike dream! Now come on, Aoki! Wake up already!" By this point Kiriya was so worked up, she was practically having a manic episode.

"So you're tellin' me we had the exact same dream where we switched bodies at the exact same time? And we both somehow managed to dream about each other's rooms with pinpoint accuracy even though we'd never been there before? And the things I moved around in the dream magically also got moved in real life?"

"Why not? Sometimes a lot of small coincidences happen at the same time! Call it a miracle!"

"Sure, and ya know what else would be a miracle? *Me and you switchin' bodies!*"

"Of all people, why with YOU?!" Kiriya howled.

"Well, it's probably fate or whatever! Ties from a past life or something! Honestly, at this point, you might as well just go out with me already!"

"What kind of leap of logic is that?" Taichi retorted, though neither of them appeared to have heard him.

"UGGGGHHHH! This is why I can't stand you!" Kiriya shuddered and backed away into the corner.

"...So which is it, you two? I don't care if it's some weird fantasy or delusion or whatever. Just tell us what happened," Inaba muttered. She sounded well and truly fed up.

“We don’t need to talk about it, Inaba! Aoki and I never switched! It never happened! I could maybe see it happening with Iori, but never with Aoki! Absolutely not! Not on your life! Denied! That creep’s just making stuff up about me...!” Kiriyama wailed as she threw her arms around Nagase.

“There, there...” Nagase cooed, stroking Kiriyama’s back as though she were a particularly rambunctious puppy.

“Wait, what? So you refuse to accept it just because it happened with me?” Aoki’s shoulders slumped.

“Hang in there, buddy,” Taichi said, clapping him on the shoulder. He still didn’t quite understand what was going on, but he could empathize, at least.

As for whether Aoki and Kiriyama did or didn’t switch bodies, the debate went back and forth and back and forth and back and forth...

Eventually Taichi and Nagase started their own running commentary of the argument, pondering whether it might simply have been a symptom of food poisoning or something, until Inaba finally snapped.

“Enough! All of you, chill the fuck out and GO HOME!”

With that, their regularly scheduled meeting was officially postponed.

Chapter 2: B_____

The next day, the members of the CRC gathered in Rec Hall Room 401 in order to hold the meeting that should have happened the day before. Naturally, Yaegashi Taichi was among them. The five of them had already taken their seats at the table. Today Aoki Yoshifumi and Kiriya Yui seemed to be a little tense, but otherwise quiet. Personally, Taichi had made it a point not to bring up what had happened yesterday, as it seemed like a sore subject.

An awkward silence hung in the air. But this seemed to matter little to vice president Inaba Himeko, who started the meeting without further ado.

“Now then, let’s begin. First order of business—”

“Oh crap! I forgot I left something in the classroom!” Nagase Iori blurted out, bringing the meeting right back to a screeching halt.

“Rrgh... I wanna get this shit done today! Don’t kill my momentum here!” Inaba snapped.

“Poor Inaban. Better luck next time!”

“You do realize it’s YOUR fault, right?!”

“Yeah, yeah. Anyway, Inaban! Is it cool if I go grab my stuff?” Nagase asked innocently, a sweet smile on her face. Her ponytail almost seemed to be bouncing of its own accord, though obviously that wasn’t actually the case.

“Can’t it wait...? Ugh, fine. Go get it...”

“Yes, sir!”

“Do I look like a ‘sir’ to you...? Aaand she’s not listening.”

Nagase dashed out of the clubroom before Inaba could even finish her sentence.

“Hehe! She sure knows how to get your goat,” Kiriya snickered. It was the first time she’d smiled that day.

“I wouldn’t go that far... She’s definitely a handful, though,” Inaba muttered with a sigh.

With that, the tension in the room seemed to fade. Once the heavy mood had cleared, Aoki started telling his usual stupid jokes, with Kiriya and Taichi calling him out on his awful punchlines. Bit by bit, the clubroom was regaining its usual cheer.

“Problem is, I can never tell if she’s doing it on purpose,” Taichi heard Inaba mumble to herself.

Just as she finished, everything went dark.

The next thing he knew, the world had tilted sideways.

No, wait. He was the one tilted sideways. Specifically, his head. That made more sense.

He quickly realized he was bent over a desk, his cheek pressed to the cool plastic.

He pushed himself upright and looked around.

This was... not the clubroom.

He was standing in an empty classroom.

Outside, he could faintly hear the crack of a baseball bat mixed with some athletic club’s jogging chant.

A wave of dizziness rushed over him, and he quickly grabbed the desk for support.

Something felt very off.

Was it just the dizziness? No, it had to be more than that.

Just moments prior, he’d been up on the fourth floor of the Rec Hall, in the CRC clubroom. That much was fact. Hell, he’d been in the middle of a conversation with Inaba. But now, mysteriously, he was standing in a classroom.

How?

Taichi looked around the room, trying to get his bearings. The positions of the

desks, the messages on the bulletin board, the writing on the chalkboard, the little bookshelf in the corner—all of it was keenly familiar. This was Class 1-C, Taichi's classroom. And there was no possible way he could have walked all the way here in the span of a few measly seconds.

Goosebumps pricked up over his arms as a shudder ran down his spine. Had he teleported here? Or had he somehow blacked out during the time it took him to get here? Or... had he simply dreamed that he'd been in the clubroom, when in fact he was here in the classroom, sleeping the entire time?

Or maybe... none of the above?

"What the heck is... Huh?!"

Startled, Taichi clapped a hand over his mouth.

"No way..." His hand descended down past his chin.

His neck was smooth, like a girl's. He couldn't even feel the bulge of his Adam's apple.

For a moment, he attempted to convince himself he'd somehow misheard the voice that had come out of his mouth.

No dice.

He knew what he'd heard.

So why was his voice suddenly soft and sweet, like a girl's?

Was he dreaming?

Sadly, no. He was definitely awake.

No dream on Earth could possibly be this realistic.

Calm down. Calm down. Calm down. Calm down. Calm down.

He silently willed himself not to let his imagination get carried away with him... but it was far too late. In the back of his mind, he recalled everything Aoki had said yesterday.

His only option was... to check.

With that thought, Taichi took a deep breath, exhaled, and slowly lowered his

gaze.

Pleated cloth wrapped around his waist, hanging to his knees. Specifically, it was an item worn almost exclusively by women: a skirt.

Below the skirt was a several-centimeter gap of bare leg, followed by a pair of black knee-high socks.

Taichi groaned softly, in a voice that was definitely not his own—though, for the moment, technically it was.

Next he checked his upper body, tugging on his clothing with both hands. It was without a doubt the Yamaboshi High school uniform—the girl's uniform.

His head began to spin.

Nothing. Nothing made sense. *Nothing about this made any sense.*

Except... a certain glaring possibility was already present in the back of his mind.

But something else—something he'd steadily built up over the course of his entire life—was trying desperately to bury it in a haze.

Unfortunately, the cruel reality of the situation was staring Taichi in the face.

Something hovered at the edge of his vision—something that the average guy, or at least Yaegashi Taichi, was certainly not meant to possess.

His chest was... inflated.

And not just a little.

No, this was no minor swelling. This was far beyond the scope of what the average male could expect to achieve.

This was, almost undoubtedly, a pair of (usually) lady-exclusive... *b*____.

At this point, he would be forced to accept what he already knew to be true... assuming they were real, of course.

Swallowing hard, Taichi willed himself not to panic.

Then, steeling his resolve, he raised both hands... placed them on each of the twin mounds... and squeezed.

Once... twice... three times... then four...

They were pillowy soft, yet had a firm elasticity, puffing out slightly through the gaps in his fingers. It was unlike anything he had ever felt before.

He was in unknown territory. In all sixteen years of his life, he had never touched the real deal, and yet somehow he knew. They were, without a shadow of a doubt, the real, genuine article. A bona-fide pair of... *b*____. With each squeeze, he felt a strange, almost ticklish sensation spread through his body. Evidently a girl's *b*____ were not just there for decoration— But before Taichi could finish that thought, the classroom door slid open, and someone walked in.

Their eyes met.

Taichi was already having a hell of a time struggling to process how he'd ended up in these circumstances. So when this new complication rolled in, he failed to react in time.

As it happened, the person who walked in was none other than Fujishima Maiko, president of Class 1-C, wearing her trademark glasses, her dark hair tied back neatly, and now frozen in mid-stride. They stared at each other wordlessly for a few seconds before Fujishima finally broke the silence.

"I, er... I saw the windows had been left open in here, so I came in to close them. The weather report said it might rain tonight, after all... So tell me, [Nagase-san]... what exactly are you doing?"

Fujishima had called him [Nagase]. On the inside, he was definitely still Yaegashi Taichi... but on the outside, he was apparently [Nagase Iori].

"I ask because, to me, it looks an awful lot like you're playing with your own breasts."

At this, Taichi realized he still had his hands on "his" chest. Hastily, he relinquished his grip. His brain was lagging under the strain of too much, too fast... but he knew he was in trouble. Fujishima eyed him for a while longer, as if sizing him up. Her eyes glittered behind the lenses of her glasses. Taichi wanted to bolt, but found himself rooted to the spot.

A heavy silence descended between them.

Then, at last, Fujishima spoke once more.

“Want some help with that?”

“.....What?”

Whatever it was he’d been expecting, it certainly wasn’t *that*.

“It’s better to have someone else do it for you... if you know what I mean.”

“N-No thanks. I think I’ll pass.”

While he didn’t actually know what she meant by that, he wasn’t sure he wanted to find out.

“No need to be shy, now. I’m pretty good with my hands.” Fujishima took a step forward.

“Uh... Fujishima...?”

She was acting... different. Normally she was the very model of a straight-A student, but now... The look on her face was so uncharacteristically seductive, Taichi was at a total loss.

Meanwhile, Fujishima was getting closer... and he was starting to panic. He got the distinct sense that his virginity was in danger... or was it technically Nagase’s?

He didn’t have time to figure it out.

“L-Let’s both just calm down, Fujishima! I’m sure we can talk this whole thing out!”

“I agree. We can let our bodies do the talking.”

“B-Bodies?! S-Slow down for a sec!”

What the hell is happening right now?! Can’t you at least give me five minutes to figure out what’s going on?!

Help came when the classroom door whipped open, and someone came dashing in.

“TAICHIIIIII!” There stood [Yaegashi Taichi]... or rather, someone piloting his body.



Taichi's brain was still a jumbled mess, but he forced himself to think as quickly and coherently as possible.

Fujishima had called him [Nagase]. Ignoring the scientific impossibility of it all, if he were to simply accept it as fact that he was somehow piloting [Nagase's body], then... did that mean the person in [his body] was Nagase?

"Y-[Yaegashi-kun]?!" Fujishima looked up in surprise at the sudden intruder.

"Fujishima-san! Sorry to interrupt, but it's an emergency! I need to borrow Taichi—I mean, me—I mean, [Nagase Iori]! Come on, let's go!" [Taichi] walked right up to [Nagase] (the real Taichi), grabbed [her] by the arm, and turned to leave.

But before they could, Fujishima seized [her] other arm. "Wh-What's your issue, [Yaegashi-kun]?! We're busy, if you don't mind!"

"Yeah, it was definitely about to get busy in here, if you get what I'm saying... but I really need to go! Please let me go, Fujishima!" [Nagase] (Taichi) yelled.

"See? Listen to Taichi—I mean, [Nagase]!" said [Taichi] (Nagase).

"What's gotten into the two of you?! If you need to borrow Nagase-san so badly, then I'd appreciate an explanation first!" Fujishima insisted.

"Nrgh... You leave me no choice... Take THIS!"

With that, [Taichi] (Nagase) lunged at Fujishima.

"Coochie coochie coo!"

"No! Ahaha! STOP! Not my armpits! AAAH! HAHA! G-Get your dirty paws off me, [Yaegashi-kun]! Hahahaha! S-Stop...!"

"H-Hey! Nagase! Er, you are Nagase, right?! Whatever! Right now you're [me], so try not to get me in too much trouble, alright?!"

Class 1-C was the perfect picture of pandemonium.

"Is this some kind of joke?" Inaba stared at them coldly.

After arriving back at the clubroom, [Taichi] and [Nagase] quickly began to try and piece together what was going on.

At first there was chaos—peering into mirrors and promptly screaming at their reflections—but the two of them had since calmed down. According to Nagase, she was in the classroom when it happened. All of a sudden she blacked out, and the next thing she knew, she was sitting in the clubroom in the middle of a conversation with Inaba and the others.

And according to the others, who had witnessed the whole thing, [Taichi] had suddenly collapsed forward in his chair—almost like he'd passed out—then immediately straightened back up again. Once in Taichi's body, Nagase had panicked for a moment. Then, as soon as she remembered Aoki's story from yesterday, she bolted all the way back to the classroom to look for [herself]... and now here they were.

"I can't believe Taichi and I swapped bodies... Feels more like our bodies swapped us, to be honest!" [Taichi] (Nagase) laughed cheerfully. She was unbelievably chill about the whole thing.

"Uh... Am I going blind, or is that an actual legit grin on Taichi's face? I've only ever seen him make like a half-smile, half-grimace!" Kiriya blinked.

"I know, right? The dude's not even that bad-looking. Maybe if he always smiled like that he'd be more popular with girls," Aoki replied.

"Is that what my normal smile looks like to everyone else? A half-smile, half-grimace? I didn't realize it was that bad..."

"WHO CARES?! Don't change the goddamn subject!" Inaba slammed her fist down on the table. "Gah...!"

"Bet that hurt, didn't it?"

"Shut the fuck UUUP!" Inaba lashed out at [Nagase] (Taichi) with a throat thrust—and spun on her heel at the last second, whipping her hand away before the blow could land. She froze, her arms now raised high over her head like a ballerina, her face twitching from either embarrassment or rage.

"You look like you're having fun," [Taichi] (Nagase) snickered.

"I get it! Taichi dropped one of his classic snarky one-liners, and you were gonna smack him for it like usual, but then you remembered he's technically lori-chan right now, so you stopped yourself. Makes sense," Aoki commented.

“And now here you are, mansplaining the situation to her. Sucks to be Inaba right now,” Kiriya added.

The commentary was brutal.

Her expression still twitching, Inaba lowered her arms and took a deep breath, as if willing herself to calm down.

“Man, you’re kind of hilarious today,” [Nagase] (Taichi) remarked as the thought crossed his mind.

Inaba whipped her head around and fixed him with a vicious glare. “Rest assured, I won’t forget this, Tai...” She cut herself short, her eyes wide with shock.

[Taichi] (Nagase) smirked like she’d seen it coming. “Inaba, you totally just looked at [Nagase Iori] and said ‘Taichi,’ didn’t you?” Nagase Iori was clearly the only member of the club who could go toe-to-toe with Inaba and live to tell the tale.

“Nggh...!” Inaba grimaced. “It’s your fault for... putting on this stupid little act in the first place...!”

“Do you really think Taichi could pull off a Nagase Iori impression this believable?” [Taichi] (Nagase) pressed. Her body and voice were all Taichi’s, but her mannerisms and speech were undeniably Nagase’s.

“Inaba, I know this is hard to believe. Hell, even I’m having trouble accepting it. But it’s the truth. I’m the real Taichi, and the [Yaegashi Taichi] you see here is actually Nagase.” Admittedly it felt a little weird making that declaration in a high-pitched girly voice.

Inaba bit her thumbnail in frustration, then changed tack. “Yui! Aoki! What do you two think about this? Yesterday you were both saying—well, okay, Aoki was saying you swapped bodies yesterday, right?”

“Oh yeah, Taichi and Iori-chan have *definitely* swapped bodies. Takes one to know one, y’know? You agree with me, right, Yui?”

“Ugh... I guess I have to, don’t I...”

“But you flat-out denied it yesterday!” Inaba argued.

“Look, I’m not happy about this either, okay?!” Kiriya slammed both hands on the desk and jumped to her feet, her long chestnut locks flying in all directions.

“Wait, so you admit we switched bodies the other night?” Aoki shot her a daft grin, and she scowled.

“Yeah, I admit it...” she muttered in a small voice. “I mean, it can’t’ve just been a dream. Especially now that it’s happening to Iori and Taichi, too.”

“Give me a break. Are you guys hearing yourselves right now? Body-swapping? There’s no way a B-movie plot like that could happen in real life!”

Taichi didn’t blame Inaba for being skeptical. The average person would never believe that it was humanly possible to switch bodies with someone else... not without some serious convincing, anyway. But no matter how insane it sounds at first, once someone experiences it for themselves, it starts to seem like the most obvious thing in the world. It seems impossible on paper, but once you cross the threshold, well, it’s just another part of your life at that point.

Inaba looked around the room at the others. Each of them nodded.

“I still think you people came around a little too quickly... Pretty sure somebody ought to be panicking over this, at least!”

“Well, I mean... Once it happens, it all just kinda clicks, y’know? Like, duh, of course!”

“Nagase, that doesn’t really explain anything,” [Nagase] (Taichi) retorted.

“Ugh, this is giving me a headache... But at this rate we’re just gonna keep going around in circles... Alright, let me ask you one more time. You swear this isn’t some asinine joke? Do you *absolutely* swear, *on your lives*, that the two of you have swapped bodies?”

“I’ll say it a hundred times. I may look like [Nagase] on the outside, but on the inside, I’m one-hundred percent Yaegashi Taichi.”

“Which means you know things only the real Taichi would know, right? And that Taichi knows things only Iori would know, I take it?”

It was obvious how Inaba was planning to have them prove their identities.

“Good call. That’s probably the simplest way to prove we are who we say we are. So, ask me anything and I’ll answer it... though it might be tricky to think of something that you and I both know, but Nagase doesn’t...”

“Oh, we won’t need to worry about that,” Inaba replied confidently, dismissing his concerns with a wave of her hand. “Now then, I’m going to ask you something, and I want you to answer it on the spot. No pausing to think.”

Inaba leaned forward and drew her face close to his. She was far more seductive than a girl his age had any right to be. Swallowing his panic, [Nagase] (Taichi) firmly returned her gaze.

“Bring it on.”

“I want an answer within *milliseconds*, got it?”

“I got it, I got it.”

“Alright, here we go.” Inaba took a deep breath and blurted out, “What’s the title of the last porno you borrowed from Aoki?!”

“Big-Breasted High School Gi—HEY! Don’t ask me that! And... and how would you even know the answer to that in the first place?!” Taichi babbled, embarrassed at the words that had nearly slipped out of his mouth at full volume.

“Whoa... It’s not every day we get to see Taichi lose his cool! Wait... Now that I think about it, how does Inabacchan know about our little deal?!” Aoki protested.

“That’s not important right now! What’s important is that we can use Aoki to confirm your answer. Now then, Taichi. *Spill it.*”

Her expression was dead serious, but Taichi could see a hint of glee in her eyes.

He glanced around at Kiriya and [Taichi] (Nagase). Kiriya was eyeing him suspiciously, her face bright red.

And then there was Nagase, who was shooting him a reproachful look, made even worse by the fact that she was using his own face to do it. “*Big-Breasted*, huh?” she parroted dryly.

“L-Listen, Inaba-san... Is there any chance you could let me just whisper it into Aoki’s ear?”

After a moment of silence, Inaba jerked her head in Aoki’s direction.

Relieved, [Nagase] (Taichi) decided to get it over with before she changed her mind. He rushed over to Aoki and whispered the title into his ear.

“Well, Aoki?”

“We got ourselves a winner, Commander Inaba! Plus I got to hear [Iori-chan] talk dirty! Totally worth it!”

“Wait, what the? I feel like I got the short end of the stick in this deal... Maybe I should bill him for it later...” [Taichi] (Nagase) mumbled to herself. Evidently she had some interesting opinions on Aoki’s stupid little comment.

“Alright then. Now that we know both of these dipshits like ’em big, it’s time to find out whether the person in [Taichi’s body] is indeed Iori.”

“Y-You don’t think she’s using this as an opportunity to get revenge on us for teasing her earlier, do you?” [Nagase] (Taichi) whimpered fearfully.

“I wouldn’t wanna get on her bad side, that’s for sure...” Clearly even Kiriya was feeling a little intimidated.

Inaba stood up, walked over to where [Taichi] (Nagase) sat, and whispered something in [his] ear. Instantly, Nagase began to choke.

“Holy crap... I-Inaba, are you serious?!”

“Dead serious,” Inaba declared.

“Y-You... You didn’t have to tell me...!”

[Taichi] (Nagase) clapped [his] hands over [his] eyes and slid down in her seat. Whatever Inaba said, it must have been something completely nuts.

“Wow... I guess we’re all growing up...” she sniffled.

What on earth could have elicited a reaction like that? Taichi was dying to know.

Stone-faced, Inaba collapsed back into her seat and stared at the ceiling. “People swapping bodies in real life... Alright, fine, I’ll believe you.”

At this, the other four gasped and cheered at their hard-earned victory.

“I asked myself, what’s more likely? That Taichi could learn to wear his emotions on his sleeve, or that body-swapping is real? And in the end, I chose the latter.”

“I don’t even know how to respond to that... And why are the rest of you all nodding like it makes total sense?!” Taichi had half a mind to find out exactly what the others really thought of him.

“So, okay. Let’s say we’ve determined that Iori and Taichi have switched bodies... What now?”

Inaba had brought up a very important question.

“Heheh! What now, indeed!” [Taichi] (Nagase) chuckled.

“I notice you’re having fun playing the role of the comic relief today,” Inaba commented dryly.

“Let’s hear more about what happened when Aoki and Kiriya switched bodies the other night. You guys went back to normal at some point, right?” [Nagase] (Taichi) asked, his optimism tempered at best.

“Hmm, let’s see... The other night, around 3 AM or so? I randomly woke up, and my bed felt all different, so I looked around and noticed I was in a room I didn’t recognize. So I got a little freaked out and started searchin’ the whole room top to bottom. Then I saw my reflection in the mirror and was like, wait, isn’t that [Yui]? So then I got even more freaked out, but right as I was about to tear my hair out, I suddenly found myself back in my own bed. The end! It was pretty much the same for you, right, Yui?”

“Yeah, for the most part... In my case, I thought it was like all just a bad dream, so the second I saw my reflection in the mirror I crawled straight back into bed. It was so crazy... I didn’t even care that the bed wasn’t mine... Oh, and when I found myself in my room again... and in [my own body] again... I noticed the place was a *total mess*.” Kiriya shot Aoki a dirty look.

“I... I’m really sorry!” Aoki apologized profusely.

“Hmmm... So how long would you say it lasted, all told?” [Taichi] (Nagase)

asked Aoki.

“Less than an hour for sure... I wanna say thirty, forty minutes?”

“That’s it? This is one bizarre phenomenon... Well, I guess it’s bizarre regardless, but still...” Inaba grimaced.

“I think maybe it wears off over time. Or maybe something else trig—”

Before he could finish his sentence, Taichi’s consciousness went black, almost as if someone had pulled the plug on his brain.

“—Hey! You alright?!”

The loud voice rattled around in his head. Wincing, Taichi opened his eyes.

All at once, his surroundings returned exactly as they were before.

No, wait. Something was different.

Inaba had been sitting diagonally across from him moments ago, but now she was directly in front of him. Aoki and Kiriya had changed positions, too. But most importantly, someone in Nagase’s body was now looking at him. This could only mean one thing.

“We’re back to normal!” Nagase and Taichi exclaimed in unison, both beaming brightly.

“Gimme a break...” Inaba mumbled, sliding lower in her seat.

By the end of the day, Vice President Inaba ordered the members of the CRC to keep the body-swapping situation to themselves for now, and then they all went home.

Chapter 3: Definition of “Fascinating”

When Yaegashi Taichi arrived at school the next morning, he headed directly for the clubroom on the fourth floor of the Rec Hall. This was because, on his way there, he had received an email from one Kiriya Yui that read “Meet in the clubroom as soon as you get here! MANDATORY.”

He and Nagase had only switched bodies just yesterday. Surely anyone in his shoes would have been on edge.

As soon as he entered the clubroom, he spotted Nagase Iori sprawled out on the couch, looking utterly zoned out. Her usual sparkle was now dark and cloudy. She must have been exhausted. She seemed... empty, somehow.

“Morning, Nagase... It is you, right?”

A question he ordinarily wouldn’t dream of asking someone first thing in the morning.

“Hiya, Taichi. At least, I’m guessing you’re Taichi.”

What a bizarre conversation.

About a minute or so later, a third person arrived at the clubroom.

“Sup, Ao—” Nagase stopped short.

Aoki Yoshifumi had entered the clubroom looking white as a sheet and ready to pass out at a moment’s notice—much like he had a few days prior.

“Y-You okay, buddy...?” Taichi asked hesitantly.

“Oh, yeah, totally... NOT!” On the outside—excluding his pallid complexion—Aoki looked to be his usual lanky, goofy self. His attitude, however, was completely off.

“You wouldn’t happen to be... Yui, by any chance...?” Nagase asked with a tone of forced cheer.

Kiriya Yui had switched bodies with Aoki just three days prior. Had the

same thing happened for a second time?

“That’s right! I’m Kiriyama Yui! God, I hate this... I can’t take this anymore...!”
[Aoki] (Kiriyama) shuddered.

No matter how much she professed to be Kiriyama on the inside, it was hard to believe when she looked so much like Aoki on the outside. Hell, for all they knew, it could have been Aoki acting like a girl for a laugh.

That said, it was obvious this was no joke. Her sentiments were clearly the genuine article.

“Just calm down, Kiriyama. We know it’s you in there. We believe you.”

But Taichi’s words of encouragement fell on deaf ears. Evidently [Aoki] (Kiriyama) just couldn’t take it anymore.

“I mean, what kind of sick joke IS this?! Why does it have to be with Aoki?! Why do I have to end up in this gross body?! Why can’t I trade with Iori instead?!”

“Is that really the part you should be upset about...?”

Short answer: no, it wasn’t.

“Mornin’, y’all!”

Then a fourth person entered the clubroom—and the three of them froze.

“Gotta say, I’m not stoked about this whole situation first thing in the morning, y’know? Wait, huh? What is it? What’s wrong, guys? You look like you’ve seen a ghost or somethin’.”

This easygoing comment was delivered in a deep and commanding voice belonging to the one and only Inaba Himeko. In all the time they’d known each other, Taichi had never heard Inaba talk that way. It was rather reminiscent of... Aoki.

A split-second later, the door slammed open with a loud *BANG* as the fifth and final member of the CRC arrived, gasping for breath.

Someone piloting [Kiriyama Yui] swallowed hard and shouted—

“I... I admit it! You guys were telling the truth! I... I’m in [Yui’s body]!”

“I thought it was...” Taichi began.

“Limited to...” Nagase continued.

“Two people...?” Taichi finished.

Due to the current state of emergency that had taken the form of a three-way body-swap—Kiryama as [Aoki], Aoki as [Inaba], and Inaba as [Kiryama]—the CRC unanimously agreed they would be skipping first period as a group.



At lunchtime, Taichi, Nagase, and Inaba were all called into the staff room. All five members of the CRC had turned up late to class that day after missing first and second period without an excused absence.

“Look, you know how it is. I know none of you really need this lecture, but I gotta at least pretend to do my job here. Just act like I’m grilling you, okay? I’m gonna eat my lunch. I got soba today, see. Can’t let it get soggy!”

The three of them stood there as Gotou “Gossan” Ryuuzen, the physics teacher who served as advisor for Class 1-C, painstakingly peeled the cling wrap from his cafeteria-bought to-go bowl.

“I’m hungry too, you know...” Nagase muttered next to Taichi.



“I gotta say, I didn’t expect this kind of behavior from good kids like you three. It’s honestly a bit concerni—ghcckk!” Gotou started to cough up his mouthful of noodles. “Haah... Man, why is it that super-hot food always makes you choke on the first bite? ...What? Just me?”

“Damn it, Gotou, just hurry it up already.”

“Inaba... We’ve been over this. I like to maintain a cool, laid-back reputation, so I’ll let you kids give me silly nicknames like ‘Gossan’ or whatever, but I’d appreciate at least a modicum of respect.”

Indeed, Gotou’s casual teaching style had made him wildly popular with the student body. Plus, it probably helped that he was in his mid-twenties. Maybe a younger teacher was just easier to relate to overall.

“You’ll get your *respect* once you quit slacking and start doing your job, Gotou. Remind me again who ended up handling all the bookkeeping for 1-C’s Culture Festival budget?”

“Oh yeah... Man, I really owe you one for that, Inaba-san! Hahaha... Please don’t mention that in front of the other teachers, okay?”

So relatable, in fact, that he was bordering on incompetent...

Gotou slurped up a few noodles, then took a sip of broth. Beside him, Taichi heard a small, cute stomach rumble in Nagase’s direction. He glanced over, and she stuck her tongue out in return, clearly embarrassed. Did everything about her have to be so goddamn adorable?

“Anyway, where was I? Oh yeah. What were you guys doing, anyway? I’m told Aoki and Kiriya missed first and second period, too. I mean, all five of you? Really? As your club advisor, I’m in hot water here... blah blah blah. Just play along with me.”

Yes, Gotou also happened to be in charge of supervising the Cultural Research Club. More specifically, he was the one who founded it earlier that year.

“We weren’t ‘doing’ anything. What happened was, we all split a 5-pack of mini chocolate cream buns yesterday, but it turned out they were expired. Sure enough, it made us all sick, and that’s why we were late,” Inaba recited matter-

of-factly. She had warned Taichi and Nagase in advance to let her do all the talking.

“And if we asked Aoki and Kiriya, would they say the same thing? I believe Hirata-sensei from Class 1-A is having a talk with them as we speak.”

“Yes, of course.”

Naturally, they’d conspired to come up with a cover story in advance.

“Mmmm...” Gotou let his eyes wander over the walls as he chewed, seeming to be deep in thought. “Well, there’s no proof that you’re lying, so I’ll take your word for it. You’re all free to go.” He gestured at the door with his chopsticks.

“Gladly. Let’s go.” With that, the three of them bowed their heads in farewell, and headed for the exit.

But before they made it out of the staff room—

“Next time you wanna skip class with the whole club, try to make it less obvious, okay?”

Either he was really understanding or just completely unfit to be a teacher.

“Thank you! We’ll be going now!” No one was listening, but it was still the polite thing to say regardless.

“Classic Inaba! I’ll never know how you can make lying look so easy!” Nagase gushed as soon as they stepped out into the hallway.

“Not only that, but she does it with such an uppity attitude, too...”

“I bet she’d make a great scam artist... Maybe insurance fraud or something!”

“Shut it, you two! If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all!” Inaba cut in, interrupting their commentary.

“Aw, c’mon. I meant it all as a compliment!” Nagase replied.

“Oh god, she’s serious...”

Despite the three-way body-swap they had endured this morning—a feat so ridiculous, it would almost certainly cause a schoolwide panic if word got out (assuming everyone believed them, anyway)—Taichi and the others seemed no worse for wear.

The key word here being “seemed,” of course. Something was almost certainly changing below the surface. But as long as no one got hurt— —And at that, darkness fell in the blink of an eye.

The next thing he knew, Taichi was face-to-face with a girl he’d never met. He was sitting down, but even still his point of view was much lower than he was accustomed to.

“What’s wrong, [Yui]? You just kinda zoned out all of a sudden. And you dropped your asparagus on the table.”

At this rate, someone was bound to get hurt sooner or later.

“I... I gotta go to the bathroom real fast.”

“Huh? Right now? Are you feeling sick?”

“No... No, um, I’m fine...”

“Want me to come with you?”

“N-No thanks! I can go by myself!”

Once again, the body-swapping phenomenon had struck, this time between himself and Kiriya. Thinking quickly, he piloted [Kiriya’s body] to the girls’ restroom to wait it out. The next moment, Kiriya’s phone started buzzing— but before he could answer it, they switched back.

All in all, the switch lasted just over three minutes.

It was a crazy whirlwind of events... A destructive force that left no one intact.



At last, sixth period came to an end.

Regardless of whatever bizarre trials the members of the CRC were forced to endure, so long as it had no impact on anyone outside the five of them, the world carried on like normal.

As he packed up to leave, Taichi chatted with his neighboring classmates. Then Gotou came in to hold a brief class assembly—making sure everyone was caught up on the latest updates, announcing who would be assigned to cleanup duty—and with that, the day was officially over.

Today's routine was just the same as always. It didn't matter if a hellacious tornado of destruction was tearing up five measly lives. To the world at large, it was a tiny blip at the most.

Together with his assigned group, Taichi headed out of the classroom to clean the restrooms.

Suddenly, he sensed someone glaring daggers at him, and a shiver ran down his spine. He turned to find Fujishima Maiko, president of Class 1-C and key participant in the antics that went down yesterday when he and Nagase had swapped bodies. Beside her stood Nagase, who shooed Taichi away with an anxious look on her face.

Perhaps today's routine had deviated a little...

"Sorry I'm la—*aagh!*"

The instant he opened the clubroom door, Nagase pounced.

"Taichi! You little punk... We need to talk, NOW!" Her whole body shook with barely contained emotion; her expression rife with confusion and panic.

"Wh-What's going on, Nagase?"

"Yesterday, in the classroom, before I got there... what the heck happened between you and Fujishima-saaan?!"

Evidently things had taken a turn for the worse.

"Oh, not much—"

"I'll decide how 'much' it is, mister!"

"Whoa, dude. Iori-chan almost never gets this mad," Aoki commented, but Taichi's brain only vaguely registered it. He had more important things to worry about... like Nagase's terrifying expression. He knew trying to cover it up would only make things worse, so he decided to come clean—and that meant telling Nagase that Fujishima had seen him fondling [her] breasts.

"Waaahhh! You squeezed my boobies?! Now I'll never get married!" Nagase sobbed.

“I... I swear, I was just trying to figure out what was going on! I needed to know if I was actually in a girl’s body!”

“Yeah, I know... It’s actually not that big of a deal... But F-F-Fujishima-san... Aaaagghh!” Nagase began to visibly quake. She was legitimately freaking out.

“Y-You okay, Nagase?! What did she do to you?! What kind of monster are we dealing with here?!”

At this rate, Fujishima was rapidly proving to be scarier than any horror movie monster. It was hard to believe any ordinary human could strike this much fear into the heart of the same girl who laughed off their body-swap like it was nothing.

“Okay, moving right along! I have a question for Taichi!” Aoki cut in loudly. “How big are Iori-chan’s—*bwegh!*”

Inaba brought her fist down on Aoki’s skull. Just watching it was painful.

“Quit wasting time with your stupid questions! If you wanna know so badly, I’ll tell you! Iori’s a C cup, okay?! And before you ask, I’m a B cup, and Yui’s an A cup!”

“Wh... What’d you go and tell them *mine* for?!” Kiriyaama howled, leaping up out of her folding chair with such momentum that it fell over.

“Sorry. Caught up in the moment.”

“Iori’s one thing, but now you throw me in ‘cuz you got ‘caught up in the moment’?! You did that on purpose!” Kiriyaama shouted, slamming her hands on the table as Inaba looked on in amusement.

“Yo, relax, Yui! So what if your twin peaks are more like speed bumps? There are plenty of other great things about you!” Aoki flashed his pearly whites.

“Speed bumps?! The heck is THAT supposed to mean?! And besides, they say anything more than a handful is a waste!”

“Oh, I see. I didn’t really have a decent frame of reference for cup sizes until now. So Inaba’s a B, and Kiriyaama’s an A...”

“TAICHI! What, are you like taking notes?! You j—*hhck!*” Kiriyaama screamed herself into a coughing fit.

Be it now or in the future, no matter what manner of insane circumstances were foisted upon them, one thing would likely never change: the CRC would always have something to yell about.

However, the situation at hand proved dire enough that they knew they needed to settle down and have an actual serious discussion about it.

“Alright, let’s go over everything we know. It all started three days ago... or more accurately, the night before yesterday. Yui and Aoki were fast asleep when they suddenly switched bodies in the middle of the night.” As the resident record-keeper, Inaba began to scrawl notes on the chalkboard as she spoke. “Next, Iori and Taichi switched yesterday after school, after we’d just met up in the clubroom. Then, this morning, while we were all on our way to school, there was a three-way shuffle: I got swapped into [Yui’s body], Yui ended up in [Aoki’s], and Aoki ended up in [mine]. Then, finally, there was a brief moment at lunchtime where Yui and Taichi switched.”

“When you lay it all out like that, it’s kinda crazy... If we keep getting shuffled around like this, I think I’m gonna lose track,” Nagase muttered, her brows furrowed.

“Next, let’s go over what we know about the phenomenon itself. Disclaimer: this is all subject to change as we learn more. So, first: it happens without warning. As of yet, we haven’t figured out what, if anything, triggers it, so we have no way of knowing when it will strike. Second: it appears to have no set time period. Today’s incident at lunch holds the record for shortest swap at just over three minutes, and the swap this morning has been the longest we’ve seen at 90 minutes. Between all four instances, this brings us to an average duration of 40 minutes. Third: it takes place specifically between the members of the CRC... Okay, I’m honestly not too sure about this one. It’s a bit too oddly specific for this phenomenon to affect just the five of us, so we should assume there’s a chance it’ll spread. Lastly, as of today, we’ve discovered that the body-swap itself can take place between more than just two people. Am I missing anything?”

“Oh, um... Well, there’s something that’s been bothering me...” Kiriya answered hesitantly.

“There’s no concrete basis for any of this, so feel free to say whatever’s on your mind,” Inaba responded, though judging from her tone, it was hard to say whether she was trying to encourage Kiriya or not.

“So, um... I might be totally overthinking this because I’ve been involved in most of the swaps, but when it happened to Iori and Taichi, [Taichi’s body] fell forward like he was totally passed out, remember? But this morning, when it was the three of us—when I found myself in [Aoki’s body], [he] was just sitting on the ground, not completely collapsed like that... And...” Kiriya trailed off and looked over at Taichi.

Sensing where she was heading with this, he picked up where she left off. “Good point. When I switched with Nagase, [her body] was collapsed on top of a desk, but when it happened with you, [your body] stayed perfectly upright in your chair. And with chopsticks in [your] hand, too... although I did drop your asparagus.”

“Right? And when I was [you], I felt [your] knees buckle a bit, but other than that [you] didn’t even stumble...”

“Does this mean we’re getting the hang of it, or something?” Nagase pondered.

“That’s a valid observation. Nice going, Yui.” Inaba paused. “But if we’re building up a tolerance to the body-swap... is that necessarily a good thing?”

The implication of her words loomed heavily over the CRC. How long would this continue? And supposing it would last a while... where was the light at the end of the tunnel?

“Alright. If there are no further comments, let’s start discussing what we can do to combat this situation.” For a moment, Inaba had looked just as conflicted as the rest of them, but she quickly recovered her momentum. Her motto: maintain total control of the situation at all times. And it was to that end that she dedicated her time to information gathering and analysis.

“The first thing we need to figure out is *how this started*. Crazy shit like this doesn’t just happen every day. There has to be a reason behind it... At least, I really hope there is... So, any ideas? I, for one, certainly don’t remember signing up for this.”

“What could the cause even be? I mean, if we somehow triggered it, surely it would have been really obvious the second it happened.”

“Taichi, don’t be a dipshit. That’s exactly why I’m asking everyone to think about it.”

Okay, sheesh... You didn’t have to call me a dipshit... Taichi thought to himself.

“Hmm... Well, when ya see it happen in manga, usually it’s because two characters crashed into each other at full speed, right?”

“Aoki, you moron! I’m gonna call you Moroki for short! Anyway, of all the stupid things you could possibly... Well... Then again, this whole situation is stupid to begin with, so maybe you’re actually on the right track here...”

On second thought, maybe “dipshit” isn’t so bad.

“Goddamnit... The second you accept one implausible thing as plausible, suddenly it’s all fair game...” Inaba bit her index fingernail in frustration.

“Seriously, guys, we need to think about this. There’s got to be some kind of explanation for—”

Just then, the door opened.

Outside of the five members of the CRC, Room 401 never saw any visitors. No one was ever desperate enough to climb all those stairs; the five of them would get summoned down to the ground floor instead. As far as Taichi was aware—that is to say, as of this spring, when the room was officially assigned to the Cultural Research Club—he and his clubmates were the only people to ever set foot in 401.

But now an outsider had opened the gates to their inviolate space.

Instantly, the tension in the room spiked. With everything that was happening to them, this unusual event felt far more significant—like a sign of something to come.

Their visitor peered inside the room. It was Gotou Ryuuzen, advisor to Class 1-C and supervisor for the Cultural Research Club.

“...Hellooo... Good to see you...” His voice was unusually lethargic.

“For fuck’s sake, Gotou! Warn us before you come up here! You nearly scared

the shit out of me!”

Evidently even the usually unshakeable Inaba was a little unnerved by this... though in Taichi’s opinion, Gotou hadn’t really done anything to warrant a reaction like that.

“Well, that’s hardly my problem...” Gotou seemed... different, somehow. His eyes were half-lidded, as though someone—or something—had drained all the vigor from his spirit.

“What’s the matter with you? Feeling sick or something?” Inaba asked. Evidently his listlessness had given her cause for concern as well.

“No, no, [this fellow] is perfectly fine... Ridiculously healthy, as a matter of fact... I imagine it’s just my lack of enthusiasm, or spirit, or guts, or vitality, or whatever else...”

Gotou didn’t sound like himself. Nothing he said made any sense.

Then an impossible conclusion dawned on them.

“Who are you?” Nagase asked, her dour, icy gaze fixed firmly on the person who, by all accounts, should have been [Gotou Ryuuzen].

“...Thank you for understanding, Nagase-san... That’ll make this go by faster... It’s too much effort to have to explain every last little thing...”

“Wh... What kind of joke is this...?” Inaba forced the words out like she was desperate to cling to any other possibility.

“Compared to what you five are going through right now, I’d say this is rather tame...”

“Hold on a minute... What’s wrong with you, Gossan?” Kiriama asked, utterly lost.

“Nothing’s wrong... The five of you were getting good and panicked over this body-swapping business, so I thought I’d pay you a visit, obviously... I’m not here for the fun of it, you know... Oh... Another thing... Please stop calling me ‘Gotou’ or ‘Gossan’ or whatever... That’s not my name... Although I suppose it doesn’t really matter...”

Its words pierced deep into their hearts. Instantly, they knew their normal

lives were gone for good.

The Gotou-esque entity then proceeded to describe the body-swapping incidents in painstaking detail, including tidbits the five of them hadn't shared with each other. With this, Inaba's pet theory—that Gotou had been eavesdropping on their conversation and was just screwing with them—was proved irrefutably false.

And if the five of them could switch bodies at any given time, it wasn't a stretch to assume it was possible for other people, too.

"...Alright. I get that you're... different, and you're not the same Gotou we know. So who exactly *are* you?"

At Inaba's question, [Gotou] adopted a contemplative stance. "Who am I, you ask...? I'm not really sure how to answer that... I have a sort of name, I suppose... It's «Heartseed»..."

"Heartseed? What, you're named after some obscure plant?" Inaba retorted under her breath.

"...Huh...? I'm not sure... But in terms of my role here, I'm the one who watches over all of you, I suppose you could say..." It sighed. "Forget it... Let's just say I'm a nobody named «Heartseed» and leave it at that..."

"You watch over us...? Wait, but... then what happened to the real Gossan? Is he in [someone else's body] right now?"

"Ah... Quite astute, Yaegashi-san... Thank you for helping things along... Basically, yes. Though, to be exact, in my case, it's not a 'switch,' per se... That would take too much time... More like I'm just visiting, I guess...? I don't really need you to understand, I suppose... Ugh... Why did I bother explaining, then...? Do you mind if I get right to the point...? Just let me say my piece so I can go home... Thank you for your cooperation..."

With its lethargy and blatant apathy toward everyone else, [Gotou] «Heartseed» was in full control of the conversation.

"Then, does this mean you will enlighten us as to the circumstances we currently find ourselves in, my good sir?" Aoki asked, apparently having adopted some sort of strange, overly-polite persona.

“Oh... Well... More or less... But it might not be the explanation you’re all hoping for... After all, there’s no point in living up to your hopes in the first place... Now then... Let’s get started... Oh, wait... Does one of you want to take notes or something...? Oh... Right... I guess you don’t have to, since you can just rely on Inaba-san’s photographic memory...”

“How do you even know about that?” Inaba muttered, but [Gotou] «Heartseed» ignored her and carried on.

“Let’s see... Well, for the time being... The five of you will be switching bodies with each other, completely at random... I’ll go ahead and say this... You’re all doing a great job so far... Not that I actually meant a word of that... Wait... I shouldn’t have said that last part... Oops... I did it again... I’ve been talking to myself a lot lately... It’s a bad habit I’d like to unlearn, but... well... I don’t care *that* much, I suppose... Guess I won’t bother unlearning it, then...”

“So it’s totally random who ends up switching with whom? And it happens at random, too?” Nagase asked. She was surprisingly calm and rational—much more so than Taichi had ever seen her. Her voice seemed... colder, somehow.

“Ah... I knew I could count on you, Nagase-san... Yes, that’s exactly right... The five of you will be switching bodies at random, and I’ll be observing the results... That’s all there is to it... Oh, but I won’t be infringing on your privacy 24/7, so no need to worry about that... I only watch under certain conditions... I don’t watch for the fun of it, after all... It’s too much effort... Does that answer all your questions...? Though, even if it doesn’t, I’m not planning to do anything about it...”

“That doesn’t even *begin* to answer our questions,” Taichi retorted.

Inaba let out a breath. “Okay... Normally this is the part where I’d say ‘you’re not making any goddamn sense,’ but then again, our current situation doesn’t make much rational sense, either. So, I’ll bite. I have a few questions for you. One: why us? Two: do you have full control over what happens to us? Three: how do we make this stop? Four: what is your objective in doing this?” She paused. “Honestly, I have a hell of a lot more where that came from, but I’ll leave it at that for now.”

[Gotou] «Heartseed» froze, staring blankly in Inaba’s direction for a few

moments. “Those are all very astute questions, Inaba-san... I’m impressed you didn’t bother asking me how I’m capable of doing this in the first place... Under circumstances like these, it’s a common question, but upon further reflection you soon realize it doesn’t actually matter... Ugh... There I go rambling on about pointless nonsense again...” It droned on at a snail’s pace. “Let’s see... Regarding your first question, you were chosen purely by chance... Nothing more to it, really... Well... More accurately, you were chosen because you happened to be interesting, kind of...”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Taichi muttered.

“Come now... Wouldn’t you agree the five of you are a bit more fascinating than most...? Oh... Right... I forgot... Some people are patently oblivious...”

By “some people,” it seemed it was referring to the five of them. But what did it mean by it?

“What else was there? Do I have control... How to make it stop... My objective...? Okay, I’ll answer them in that order... Wait... Was I ever obligated to answer all this in the first place...? Ah, yes... This is entirely pointless and unnecessary, isn’t it... I was so caught up in the flow of the conversation, I nearly told you everything... That was a close call... Whew... Anyway, there’s no set rules... You’ll be switching bodies for a while, and once I feel you’ve proved sufficiently entertaining, that’s when it will end... It won’t be for too much longer... Not that I know your definition of ‘long,’ nor do I care to find out...”

“So, judging from that last part, I take it you’re in full control of this situation—or at least, you decide when it ends. In which case, I think it’s safe to say you’re the one who made this happen,” Inaba declared.

“Uh oh... Busted... Actually, I wasn’t ‘busted’ until just now, when I copped to it... Anyway, please just go about your daily lives and try not to worry about it too much... Worrying about it is a waste of time, after all... Think of it as just another one of life’s little hurdles, or something like that... You’re not in any mortal danger, after all... Also, I encourage you not to waste time thinking about the science behind how the body-swap works... It’s beyond your understanding... And if possible, I would greatly appreciate it if you could forget I ever existed... The five of you have more important matters at hand... Use that

time to think about yourselves instead... That way the body-swap won't have to be dragged out any longer than it needs to be... It's a win-win scenario for both of us... Yes... How lovely it would be..."

Did «Heartseed» actually expect them to just learn to live with it?

"Am I forgetting anything...? Oh, right... I strongly recommend you keep this body-swap situation to yourselves... It'll only complicate matters... Not so much for me, but almost certainly for you... You know what I'm getting at, yes...? I'm going to assume you do..." [Gotou] «Heartseed» scratched [his] head and stared up at the ceiling like it was reviewing a mental list. "Okay... I think that's everything... In fact, I'm just going to assume I'm done so I can leave... Anyway, best of luck... I'll be rooting for you from the top of my heart... Oh, wait... I should have lied and said 'the bottom of my heart' instead..."

With that, [Gotou]—or rather, «Heartseed»—turned and headed for the door. Clearly it had no interest in helping them understand. It just wanted to show up, drop its bombshell, and leave— "Hold it right there!"

—but naturally, Inaba wasn't about to let it off the hook. That would go against her motto, after all.

She strode over and seized «Heartseed» by the shoulder. "Up 'til now I was content to shut up and let you say your piece, but I still have a ton of questions. And you haven't even answered the ones I asked earlier." If she was afraid of it, she certainly didn't act that way.

"We're in the middle of a crisis here. You don't really think we'd just *let you leave*, do you?" Nagase added, cracking her knuckles.

Inaba had a naturally combative personality, and Nagase was easily influenced by her surroundings. Let the two of them fall in sync and there would be no stopping them.

«Heartseed» looked back over [his] shoulder. "Like I said... The five of you have more important business to be dealing with... As for me, I'm not trying to pick a fight with you... I sincerely mean that... Not that I care if you like me—oh, I shouldn't have said that part..." Judging from his expression, he didn't seem too upset by his slip-up. If anything, he looked to be mildly annoyed at most.

Inaba forcibly spun him back around to face them. “We’re not just gonna roll over and let you have your way!”

The next instant, his eyes glinted with unearthly light, and a dull impact rippled through the room as flesh and bone collided. Inaba flew backwards, colliding with Nagase, and Aoki behind both of them. Chairs and tables toppled as the three of them crashed to the ground—almost like a scene out of an action flick.

Someone screamed.

Collapsed on top of Aoki, Inaba clutched at her chest, coughing up fluids. It looked like she’d taken a hard elbow strike to the solar plexus.

“Ouchie...” Nagase had fallen squarely on her rear and was now rubbing her tailbone. Judging from her goofy tone, she was probably fine.

“I didn’t want to have to do that, but maybe it’s the fastest way to help you understand... Seriously though, I didn’t want to do it... Too much effort...” In a blink, the bloodthirsty aura from moments before had faded, and «Heartseed» was back to its usual, sluggish self.

They were completely outmatched.

Taichi couldn’t really explain how he knew, but he did.

Meanwhile, Inaba struggled to speak as she gasped for breath. “Guys... gghcck... Don’t... let him... get away...!”

“Shhh... Just take it easy, Inabacchan!” Aoki cut in, cradling her.

“Look... I don’t believe in violence, but it looks like we don’t have a choice here,” Taichi said, stepping forward. «Heartseed» looked in his direction and fell still.

Though it was wearing [Gotou’s body], there was something imperceptible about it that made Taichi reflexively recoil.

Nevertheless, Inaba was right. They couldn’t afford to let it get away—not when it was clear it was directly involved in the supernatural phenomenon that currently plagued their every waking moment. If they let it walk out the door now, there was no guarantee they’d ever get a second chance.

At this point, they had no choice but to resort to violence—and Taichi was obligated to step up to the plate.

With «Heartseed» wearing [Gotou's face], the task at hand would not be easy, but again, he had no other option.

But then an arm shot out in front of his chest, blocking his path.

“Wait, Taichi. Let me handle this.”

It was Kiriyaama.

“But I need to—”

“No, Taichi, you *don't* need to,” Kiriyaama interrupted. She was smiling, but her brows were furrowed in frustration, as though she were admonishing a spoiled child. “Besides, you and I both know I'm stronger than you. Don't worry, I've got this.”

Taichi opened his mouth to argue, but fell silent and bit his lip instead. She was right. While he may have had superior physical strength, Kiriyaama had trained in full contact karate up until middle school. She was so talented, in fact, many considered her to be a child prodigy.

And yet, her voice was shaking.

“Then let's team up and—”

“No thanks, deadweight.”

Rejected before he could even finish his suggestion.

“Yui! What about me? I could back you up—”

“Get lost.”

Evidently she was in no mood to go easy on Aoki, either.

She hopped back and forth, assuming a low stance, her long reddish-brown hair bouncing along with her. She exuded an entirely different vibe now—one that seemed to recast every movement in slow motion. It felt like she might pounce with the slightest twitch... a fearsome aura radiating from a girl barely 150 centimeters tall.

It felt as though a bird of prey had manifested inside the room.

But «Heartseed» showed no signs of alarm; instead, it stared at her blankly.

“I’m ready to play! Not sure why you bothered waiting, though. You totally could have made your escape by now... so why didn’t you try?” Kiriyaama asked as she edged her way closer.

“...Oh, you’re right... Ugh... Hindsight is 20/20... Anyway, I just thought I might get a glimpse of something mildly entertaining... though you’d be surprised just how trivial it turned out to be...”

“Guess I’ll just have to change your mind, then.”

Kiriyaama took a step forward—then leapt into the air, launching a flying kick at [his] face like a hawk descending upon her prey.

“I’m sorry, Gossan!”

But right before her strike connected, «Heartseed» raised [his] arm to block.

In that moment, the twenty-centimeter height difference scarcely seemed to matter. And yet, in the blink of an eye, «Heartseed» had effortlessly intercepted the attack. This duel was already overwhelming for an average joe like Taichi—but it didn’t stop there.

As she descended, Kiriyaama swung her fist in midair. With her tawny tresses flowing behind her, she looked ever more like a hawk in flight.

But «Heartseed» seized her wrist with [his] free hand—a feat Taichi knew no ordinary human could pull off, though considering the bored expression on [his] face, it certainly made it look easy.

As soon as Kiriyaama’s feet hit the floor, her legs buckled, and she fell to her knees.

In an instant, her battle girl persona was shattered.

[He] was barely touching her, and yet she had completely lost the will to fight. She stared at the floor, trembling like a newborn fawn.

“Yui!”

“Kiriyaama!”

Nagase rushed over, followed by Taichi.

But the next instant, his sight warped and dimmed.

The next thing he knew, he was on his knees, cradling Inaba in his arms.

Confusion set in. Then he realized.

If he was holding Inaba, that meant he was in [Aoki's body].

A beat later, [Inaba] began to cough hoarsely once more.

"Whoa... You okay?!"

"...Inaban... Th... This really hurts...!"

Inaban.

The only person in the CRC—no, the entire school—who used that nickname was Nagase.

Taichi looked up and glanced around the room.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw someone in [his body] collapse weakly to the floor... probably Kiriyama, judging from the state she was in just moments prior. Meanwhile, [Kiriyama] was frozen in place on [her] knees, [her] wrist still in «Heartseed»'s grasp, her face white as a sheet. Lastly, someone in [Nagase's body] was standing tall with [her] arms folded across [her] chest.

"Wait... Did the body-swap just kick in...? That's actually... sort of fascinating..." said «Heartseed», looking down on Taichi and the others with an expression that suggested it wasn't fascinated in the least. "Alright... This looks like a good time for me to leave... For real this time..." It let go of [Kiriyama's] wrist and reached for the doorknob.

"Wait. At least answer me this," said whoever was currently occupying [Nagase's body]. "Obviously we're powerless to stop you, so let me ask: will we ever have another opportunity to see you again?"

"...Good question... I imagine you'll see me again once this is all over... No guarantees, though... Now, could you please stop trying to manhandle this... what was it... 'Gotou-san' person...? You're only wasting your time..."

"That so? Well then, looks like we won't be able to oppose you. Hmph... Guess we don't have a choice. I would've liked to kick your ass, but ah well..."

Unfortunate. Say, «Heartseed», before you go, would you mind if I pointed out something I just noticed?” [Nagase] asked, smirking, her tone strangely casual.

Taichi could think of only one person who would have the guts to act this way—Inaba.

“When you first got here, you said you came to us because we were ‘getting good and panicked over this body-swapping business,’ yeah? Which suggests if we hadn’t met your standards, you wouldn’t have come. And considering you said you were ‘impressed’ by my choice of questions, that must mean you’ve done this at least once before, right? And another thing—if you have a name, that would imply there are more than one of you, correct?”

Even in the face of utter chaos, Inaba could always be counted on to analyze what small scraps of data she had in order to turn the tables against her opponent... and her wicked grin was even more terrifying coming from the ordinarily sweet and innocent [Nagase].

In response, «Heartseed» offered just two words.

“Who knows...?”

Then, for the first time, [his] lip curled slightly—a shadowy, eerie smile that [Gotou] could never have managed. For a moment, Taichi could practically see sparks flying between it and [Nagase] (Inaba)... but then it returned to its usual lethargic self.

“Well... Try to put up a good fight, I guess... Oh... That kind of slipped out in the heat of the moment... I don’t actually intend to fight with you... I guess I just wanted an excuse to say it for once...”

With that, «Heartseed» walked out of the clubroom, leaving them to deal with the aftermath of its absurd experiment.

Belatedly, Taichi realized that [Kiriya] was (Aoki) via process of elimination.

Some time later, the CRC decided they needed to check on Gotou. When they arrived at the staff room, sure enough, there sat Gotou Ryuuzen, advisor to Class 1-3 and supervisor for the Cultural Research Club, looking just the same as ever. When they asked him to recount his memory of the day’s events, he replied, “What do you mean? I’ve been working on paperwork all day... Wait,

what the?! How is it already this late and I haven't made any decent progress?! That's so bizarre... Maybe it's one of the seven mysteries of Yamaboshi! You should write about this in the next issue of the Culture Bulletin!"

At this, Inaba nearly lost her patience, but then he added, "Hm? Why does my arm hurt...? Whoa! It's all red, too! Wait... If I put these two observations together, then logically... I've got it! I must've fallen asleep resting my weight on my arm! That explains it. Silly me! I need to get my act together." It was a comment so utterly blithe that Inaba lost her temper, put him (a grown man who also happened to be her teacher) in a headlock, and gave him a vicious noogie, right there in the middle of the staff room.

"Owww! Inaba! I'm technically your teacher, you know!"

"Oh yeah? If you're a teacher, then have some damn SENSE! I don't even want to bother interrogating you for clues now... Pretty sure you'd just waste my time!"

Somehow, Taichi got the sense he knew why «Heartseed» might have chosen [Gotou]... though there was no telling for sure whether his assessment was accurate.

Chapter 4: Bonds and Bombshells (One Week Later)

Yamaboshi High School was well-known for its lax school policies, save for one obnoxiously hard-line rule: all students were obligated to join a club. Supposedly the idea behind this rule was to encourage students to stay out of trouble while in exchange allowing their individuality to flourish in a relaxed learning environment.

Some found the idea of forcing club activities on high school students patently ridiculous; it wasn't like they were still in middle school. Still, Yamaboshi's club facilities and budgets were far more impressive than those of rival high schools.

But most impressive of all was the sheer number of clubs. The approval process was extremely simple: as long as you could get a minimum number of people to commit to joining, your club could be focused around basically anything. As a result, the total number of clubs exploded to well over 100. That said, a large percentage had since died out completely—and if you excluded clubs with no actual scheduled activities, the total number would shrink back to a reasonable amount (the high end of reasonable, though).

With or without activities, however, many clubs continued to exist, even if in name only... which meant first-year students were expected to choose from a giant list of over 100 clubs.

The one pitfall was thus: as a rule, any given club would only gain approval provided it was able to recruit at least five members under its helm.

At Yamaboshi, per the aforementioned rule mandating all students be affiliated with a club, all new students were required to submit a club membership application to their class advisor by a certain deadline. Those who chose an active club were promptly approved. Those who chose a dead club, however, would be given a few days to recruit other first-years (or poach older students from existing clubs) until the minimum of five members was met, at which point the club would receive official approval.

Regardless, the vast majority of students chose active clubs, as virtually all of

the most desirable clubs fell under that category. Most crucially, however, the average first-year had no interest in going to the effort of reviving a dead club.

Every now and then someone would try to join one of these defunct clubs only to find out from other students that it didn't technically exist. As such, no one ever really needed to resubmit their club membership application.

But for every rule, there are always exceptions.

In every category exists outliers.

Outliers like Yaegashi Taichi, a pro wrestling fanboy who saw "Pro Wrestling Research Club" in the club catalog and immediately submitted his membership application, unaware of the rule requiring a minimum of five members.

Outliers like Kiriya Yui, a girl who recently developed a weird obsession with all things cute, possibly because she'd spent her entire childhood taking karate lessons, who saw "Style Club" in the club catalog (founded six years ago, only active for two), decided it was a sign from God, and promptly submitted her membership application, despite everyone warning her it wouldn't meet the membership requirements, with the bizarre rationalization that it would somehow work out "because lots of girls enrolled this year."

Outliers like Inaba Himeko, a girl whose hobbies include information gathering and analysis, who tried to join the Computer Club only to get in an irreconcilable dispute with the club captain on the last day of the trial period (a dispute caused by her own arrogance and the captain's lack of patience), who then stormed back to the staff room to revoke her application, and from there attempted to revive the Data Processing Club, a dead club that was originally created by disgruntled former Computer Club members.

Outliers like Aoki Yoshifumi, a boy who had heard rumors about a "Playboy Club" that supposedly existed at Yamaboshi despite being completely unthinkable for underage students, thought it sounded like a fun time, chose to believe that he could totally still apply to join even though it wasn't listed in the club catalog, did in fact apply, only to be told that it never at any point existed, as shown by the fact that it wasn't listed in the club catalog, and then ultimately decided to try and create it himself.

Outliers like Nagase Iori, a girl who didn't feel like choosing from a list of 100+

clubs, who declared that leaving such a choice to fate would be way more fun and memorable in the long run (though it wasn't clear whether she was actually serious or just making a joke), who wrote "Your choice! ≡" on her application and ultimately left the task to the class advisor.

But so long as these outliers existed in public spaces, they were obligated to be bound by the same societal rules as everyone else. And as mere high schoolers, it was expected that they would assimilate into the dominant culture.

But even that rule had its own exceptions.

Perhaps the majority of outliers would simply submit to the overwhelming authority of the system.

But sometimes the outliers fought back.

Outliers like Yaegashi Taichi, Class 1-C, who said "Nobody told me I needed five members!"

Outliers like Nagase Iori, Class 1-C, who said "No, seriously, I want you to pick for me! I trust your judgment, Gossan!"

Outliers like Inaba Himeko, Class 1-C, who said "For now, would it be possible to extend the deadline? I promise I'll dig up four more members."

Outliers like Kiriya Yui, Class 1-A, who said "Sensei, there must be some mistake! Girls my age love cute stuff! I demand a recount!"

Outliers like Aoki Yoshifumi, Class 1-A, who said "Huh? It doesn't exist? Guess I'll have to start it myself! That's allowed, right? ...I need five members? Piece of cake!"

But this rebellion scarcely ever results in the desired outcome. Not just anyone can start a revolution, after all—the world is not that simple, and certainly not that fragile. In most cases, the outliers are either assimilated into the establishment or crushed entirely.

And yet, there are exceptions to that, too.

Sometimes, fighting the system leads to changes that the rebels never even intended.

Suppose, for example, the system was represented by a teacher named Gotou Ryuuzen, a teacher with a laid-back slacker mentality, who could be seen as either unconventional or irresponsible depending on one's perspective, who decided it was too much work to try and convince Taichi, Nagase, and Inaba to join an active club, who came up with the ridiculous idea of putting the three students together in a brand-new club so they could do whatever they wanted "because it would be faster that way."

Suppose, for example, the system was also represented by the advisor of Class 1-A, a teacher by the name of Hirata Ryouko, a woman with a friendly, devil-may-care personality, a pretty face, and a sexy figure, rumored to have been worshipped like a goddess during her high school days, a woman who had her ditzy moments, though this only served to make her even more popular among the guys, whose competence was occasionally questioned by a subset of the school, who heard that Gotou was thinking of starting up a new club and promptly volunteered two candidates from her own class.

Yes, it was a string of pure coincidences that led to the creation of the Cultural Research Club.

In other words, one could say the CRC was not only proof of the outliers' triumph over the system, but also the product of a chemical reaction borne of deviant students paired with equally deviant teachers. (Disregard the heavy implication in the latter half of that statement.) And so the Cultural Research Club was born, with Gotou stepping up as supervisor since it was his idea to begin with. Its objective: "a broader scope of research unfettered by existing frameworks." Translation: anything goes.

In line with this objective, Taichi and the others made full use of the club's allotted space and budget to... do whatever they wanted, basically.

But a club full of teenagers required at least a minimal level of supervision, and so in order for the CRC to earn its keep, the school mandated that the five of them submit a record of their activities once a month in the form of the "Culture Bulletin," a periodical that the CRC would then make available to the rest of the school. (Its often nonsensical content would go on to win them a niche fanbase among the student body.) But then, one day in September, the Cultural Research Club was plunged into a crisis that would threaten the group's

continued existence—no, forget the club. This crisis would shake the very foundations of their lives.

And this crisis, of course, was none other than the body-swap phenomenon and the resulting encounter with «Heartseed».



“As I’m sure you’re all aware, I have gathered you all here today for precisely one reason: to reflect on the events of this past week!” Inaba proclaimed. She was so worked up, her tone was veering sharply into “angry” territory, but the four others nodded along nonetheless.

A full week had passed since that Friday afternoon when «Heartseed» had revealed itself. Now it was Saturday, and the members of the CRC had assembled at Inaba’s house for a meeting.

“First things first—hmm?” Just as she was about to start, the phone began to ring from elsewhere in the house. “Sorry, I need to answer that real quick. Behave yourselves while I’m gone, got it?” With that, Inaba stalked out of the room, her chiding tone reminiscent of a beleaguered babysitter.

“Man... Inabacchan’s room totally matches her personality, don’t you think? I forget, when was the last time we came over here? Was it when we were tryin’ to figure out the schedule for the vacation we disguised as a study camp?” Aoki peered around the room as he spoke.

Personally, Taichi was inclined to agree. Inaba’s room was predominantly decorated in shades of gray and other subdued colors. It was furnished with all the basic necessities—a bed, a table, a bookshelf, a television, a computer—but no frills beyond that. Functional and efficient, just like its owner.

“Haah... Inaba’s sooo lucky. I wish I had a nice, big bedroom all to myself... I mean, like, look at this! This place fits all five of us, no problem! I finally got my own room, but it can barely even fit all my stuff! Plus, my little sister always hangs out in my room to use my TV! She’s so freaking tall, she takes up too much space in there! Little twerp... I can’t believe she’s taller than me now... Oh well. I’m happy being cute and fun-sized.”

Muttering to herself, Kiriya flopped down on the floor and started to work

her way through the plate of cookies sitting on the table.

“What’s fun-sized? Oh, your chest?” Taichi asked, though in immediate hindsight, his brain-to-mouth filter probably should have stopped him.

“Hi-YAH!” Kiriyaama beamed him in the face with a cookie. It was surprisingly painful, actually. “No, stupid! Obviously I meant my height! Ugh... You just have boobs on the brain 24/7, don’t you? Why did I think you weren’t like other guys... Guess you’re no different from that horny little imp over there...”

“You talk about your chest all the time! Just the other day you were going on about how ‘anything more than a handful is a waste’!”

“Wait, did you just call me a ‘horny little imp’? Can I at least have a chance to defend myself?!”

“Motion denied.”

At this point, Aoki was well-established as the resident butt-monkey, and Taichi was starting to feel bad for the guy.

“Whoa now! You keep throwing food around like that and Inaban’s gonna be pissed! You know she’s a total germaphobe,” Nagase remarked.

“Ugh crap, you’re right! No way am I gonna let these two creeps get me in trouble!” Kiriyaama began to crawl on all fours over the carpet, scooping up each little cookie crumb. Her long chestnut tresses tumbled over her shoulders to the floor. Paired with her petite build and frilly pastel dress, the sight held a certain allure.

Then she noticed more crumbs she’d left while eating and hastily scooped those up as well.

“As Yui shifted around to clean up her mess, the two boys watched carefully, hoping for a glimpse of her panties,” Nagase stated in her imitation narrator voice.

“What?! Nagase! Don’t be ridiculous! I would never—”

“Damn it! We were so close!”

Aoki was honest to a fault... and hopelessly, irredeemably stupid. Kiriyaama hastily sat back down, holding her skirt safely in place. She began to tremble,

her face tomato-red.

Uh-oh.

Taichi tried to think of a way to smooth things over, but came up empty. Meanwhile, Kiriya slowly reached for the plate of cookies.

“Don’t do it, Yui! I told you, Inaba’s gonna be mad if you make a mess!”

Thankfully, they could always count on Nagase to take charge of the problem she had inadvertently created— “Here, use this weighted memory foam pillow instead!”

—and make it worse.

“Nagase, I’m pretty sure that’s the opposite of a solution! Those things hurt like hell!”

But Taichi’s scream fell on deaf ears as Nagase laughed and tossed the weighted memory foam pillow into the air. As it fell, Kiriya jumped and spun in the air, a flashy move that naturally resulted in— “Ooh, I saw ‘em.”

With Aoki’s last little comment, Kiriya added another full rotation to her jump.

“FIRE!!!”

With a dull *thud* her spinning jump kick connected with the pillow and sent it flying at full speed in Aoki’s direction.

“Gyah!” Though he’d raised his arms to shield himself, the impact still sent him flying nonetheless.

And right as it hit him, the door opened. “Hey! What’s going on in h—”

FLOMP.

The weighted memory foam pillow had bounced off of its first victim and directly into Inaba’s face. It was such a solid hit, Inaba’s neck bent backwards from the blow. She froze, the pillow resting on her face.

A few agonizingly long seconds passed. Then Inaba finally straightened up, and the weighted memory foam pillow fell to the floor, revealing the demonic expression beneath.

The four of them couldn't get a word out—they just trembled in fear.

“...Raise your hand once you're ready for your punishment...!”

In the end, Nagase and Taichi each received a single flick to the forehead; Kiriya received two; and Aoki received two plus a slap to the face.

Ever since the day «Heartseed» had possessed [Gotou's body], Taichi and the others had chosen to stop trying to fight the body-swap phenomenon and just let it happen.

It would be more accurate, however, to say this was the only choice available to them. After all, they certainly couldn't ignore it. They could be forced to switch bodies at any place or time, and they couldn't just stay cooped up at home for days on end. They had no way of fighting it, either—not until they figured out who to fight and how.

Their only concrete clue was the culprit(?) itself, the one known as «Heartseed»—but though they kept a careful eye on [Gotou], the enigmatic mastermind showed no signs of resurfacing. They had no plan of action, no leads to follow, no puzzles to solve. As they fumbled around in the darkness, all they had to go on was the information that «Heartseed» itself had granted them.

With no way to verify anything it told them, their only option was to believe—or rather, hope—that the body-swap would indeed someday come to an end... and in the meantime, all they could do was wait it out.

Now, a full week later, here they were to discuss the results—with Inaba Himeko acting as master of ceremonies, chairwoman, and final decision-maker.

“Now then, first things first, let's review what we agreed upon last week regarding the handling of the body-swapping phenomenon. Our basic guidelines were determined thusly: One, stay in contact and update each other on the current situation as much as humanly possible. Two, act calmly and avoid the public eye. Three, when forced to interact with others, try your best to imitate the person whose body you're in. And lastly, don't do anything rash. At the time, I figured these four tenets would be enough to get us all safely through the average swap, but as it turns out... you imbeciles don't know how

to pay attention!”

Inaba plunked herself down on the floor, glaring around the room at each of them. Even with her legs crossed, her posture was still perfectly straight, like she was about to practice some Zen meditation.

“Rule number one of body-swapping: When you’re switched with someone of the opposite gender, *go into the bathroom that matches their gender*! Show of hands: who here has made this mistake before?”

Everyone except Inaba promptly raised their hands.

“HOW could you mess that up?! It should be the *first* thing you worry about when you’re in someone else’s body! Seriously, guys, of all the hackneyed tropes!”

“It’s just habit, I guess! We tend to run to the bathroom to hide out anyway, so... it just happens, you know?”

“No, I *don’t* know, Iori! But thanks to you idiots, now going to the bathroom is fucking excruciating!”

As teenagers, going into the wrong restroom by mistake didn’t result in some loud, crazy scandal—it just quietly weirded everyone out, particularly where [Taichi] or [Inaba] was involved. Their day-to-day demeanor was normally so level-headed and stoic, none of their classmates knew whether to treat it like a joke when it happened. In [Aoki’s] case, however, there was one incident where a few girls called him names and tried to report him to the teachers (and [he] nearly broke down in tears, as Kiriya was in [his body] at the time).

“Okay, I have a suggestion,” Kiriya piped up, raising her hand slightly. “Can we all agree to like, go to the bathroom more often when we’re in our own bodies?”

“Like I just said, going to the bathroom is extremely awkward for us now,” Inaba muttered, mildly annoyed.

“Well, whenever the three of us girls get stuck in [Taichi] or [Aoki’s body], if we have to use the restroom... then we have to see that disgusting *thing* in their pants! Aaagghhh!” Kiriya rubbed her arms to soothe the goosebumps that had pricked up from the trauma of the memory.

“You don’t need to be so afraid of it. It’s just another body part, really. Besides, haven’t you been taking care of business in a toilet stall so you don’t have to touch it?” Taichi paused. “But, well... If it really bothers you that much, then I suppose me and Aoki ought to be a little more careful.”

“Okay... Thanks, Taichi, I’d appreciate it.”

“Aw, the hell, Taichi?! Don’t go stealin’ all the brownie points for yourself! Anyway, I’ll be more careful too, Yui!”

“Aw, Yui, it’s no big deal! If I can learn to pee standing up, so can you!” Nagase guffawed.

“Nobody asked you to learn... And you probably shouldn’t brag about it,” Taichi retorted. It was hard to formulate a response when she said it all with such an innocent smile...

“Iori’s right. Their junk is nothing to be afraid of, Yui. Also, I noticed Taichi’s is bigger,” Inaba snickered.

“Don’t make this weird! Keep your little comparisons to yourself! And Aoki, for god’s sake, pull yourself together!” Taichi begged.

“The real question here is: what about us? You two haven’t done anything untoward with our bodies, have you?” Inaba asked, her expression suddenly dead serious.

Taichi responded without hesitation. “Absolutely not. Right, Aoki?”

“Well... I admit, whenever I’m in [a girl’s body], I *do* get a little curious... What? Guys, c’mon! Don’t give me that look! Obviously I didn’t actually try anything! I have morals, okay?! Besides, I haven’t ever needed to use the bathroom in someone else’s body... What? I’m serious! Now quit givin’ me the stinkeye, okay? Hahaha...” Aoki’s awkward laughter hung in the air.

“...Well, I haven’t done anything inappropriate, at least.”

“In your case, Taichi... I’ll believe you.” Evidently Inaba was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“Me either!”

“...Oh really?” She squinted suspiciously in Aoki’s direction.

“Really really! In times like these, it’s important that we trust each other, don’t ya think? So, ’course I wouldn’t do something like that! That’d be stupid!”

“...R-Right.”

For a moment, Inaba stammered, her expression grim. But before Taichi could ask her about it, Kiriya rounded on Aoki.

“Oh yeah, that reminds me! Last time you were in [my body], you made such a mess of things, didn’t you? Apparently you called my mother ‘Ma’ instead of ‘Mom’! And I heard you tried to sleep in the wrong bedroom!”

“So? Details, details! The worst that happened was your kid sister kept askin’ why [you] were actin’ weird. No big deal.”

“Maybe not to you, but it’s a big deal to me!”

“Ahem!” Inaba cut in. “We really need to be more careful about these things. There are already rumors floating around school about our weird antics as of late... though I can’t imagine they’ll ever guess that we’re switching bodies.”

That much was certain. As long as the five of them didn’t initiate the conversation, no ordinary person would ever arrive at that conclusion... but this also meant that they would ultimately be held responsible for any unusual behavior the others committed in their stead.

“Speaking of family stuff... Iori, last time I was [you], I woke up in the middle of the night and no one else was at home. What’s that about? I, um... I just... think it’s kinda not safe for a teenage girl to be home alone at nighttime...” It was a rather personal question, and Kiriya’s voice quickly grew feeble.

Nagase froze. There was a pause, and the room fell silent.

“Oh... Right. That. Guess I haven’t had the chance to bring it up before! My parents are divorced. I’m living with my mom right now, and she’s just... super busy, basically? Anyway, don’t worry. If some guy tries to mess with me, all I gotta do is hit ‘em with some pepper spray, then start whaling on ‘em! Easy!”

“No, it’s NOT that easy! You can’t just underestimate them like that! You’re putting yourself at risk! You need to prepare yourself for this stuff before it’s too late *or you’ll regret it FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE!*”

Kiriyama wasn't just regular-screaming, as was commonplace when the CRC were messing around with each other. No, this was different. She was actually, genuinely furious.

"Wha...? Uh... I... I'm sorry..." Nagase stammered, confused.

This sort of thing rarely, if ever, happened between them.

Nagase's apology quickly defused Kiriyama's anger, and her gaze fell to the floor. "Um... I... I'm sorry too."

A heavy silence dominated the room.

Upon further reflection, they were lucky they made it this far unscathed. Despite the utter insanity of switching bodies with each other, nothing serious had happened—just minor inconveniences at most.

At least, on the surface.

Was it in any way possible for an unpredictable phenomenon like the body-swap to somehow leave the five of them entirely intact? No, of course not. It was simply a matter of time before something shattered—but how long did they have until their luck ran out? And once it did... what would come of it?

Where would their bonds take them?

Before that line of thought could continue, Inaba clapped her hands together. "Moving on! The point is, we know the body-swap won't last for hours on end, so as long as we each make an effort to act responsibly while we're stuck in [another body], I'm sure we can talk our way out of any issues that occur. Granted, not all problems can be solved that way, but... Well, we can talk about that some other time."

Just like that, she forced the mood to shift. This was part of why the others were so comfortable letting her take charge. Yes, it was a conscious choice, not just Inaba being a control freak... At least, Taichi was pretty sure.

"Our current problem is that we're already causing real damage to each other. Aren't we, Aoki?" Inaba continued, her tone bitter.

"Huh? Did somethin' happen?" replied Aoki, slack-jawed.

Inaba's shoulders slumped in frustration. "How could you forget?! You fucked

up my English quiz, remember?!”

“Ohhh, *that*. Look, I’m tellin’ ya, I tried my best, alright?”

“How is a 7 out of 30 your ‘best’?! They put my name down for study hall! And compared to my usual grades, now they think something’s wrong with me! There’s no harm in being dumb as long as you keep it to yourself—but once your stupidity’s affecting my life? Now we’ve got problems!”

“What’m I supposed to do, man?! It’s not like I asked to be born this dumb!” Aoki grumbled, twirling his bangs between his fingers.

“C’mon, Inaba, it’s not the end of the world,” Taichi cut in. “That quiz didn’t even affect our final grades. And besides, Aoki isn’t going to get magically smarter anytime soon.”

“He’s right, Inaban! There’s no cure for stupid!” Nagase agreed.

“That’s right, Inaba. He was born stupid, and he’ll die stupid,” Kiriya added.

“Guys, you’re not helping! Real talk, I’m feelin’ pretty attacked right now!”

Aoki Yoshifumi, everyone’s favorite punching bag.

“Sure, maybe it’s not the end of the world to you guys, but we don’t know how long this body-swapping ordeal is gonna stick around, remember? And if it lasts until midterms, or even finals...”

Taichi, Nagase, and Kiriya gasped in unison as fear set in. They understood exactly what Inaba was implying.

Then their worst nightmare opened his mouth to speak.

“Huh? Whaddya mean? So someone might switch bodies with me, and...? Ohhh, I get it! Maybe I won’t fail every subject! Woohoo!”

“Yeah, and in exchange, you’ll fail them for someone else! You’re the only one of us who isn’t passing!” Inaba snapped, but Aoki seemed entirely unaffected.

“...Let’s just try to stay positive, guys. This’ll all be over soon,” Kiriya muttered, clasping her hands to her forehead.

The “evaluation meeting” (which ended up turning into more of a casual

hangout session) continued enthusiastically until that evening, when Inaba called it a day after claiming her parents would be coming home soon.

On the way home, Nagase went her separate way while Taichi, Kiriya, and Aoki headed home in the opposite direction... or at least, that was how it should have gone.

Instead, right as the three of them arrived at the transfer station, Aoki and Nagase suddenly switched bodies. The two of them quickly got in contact with each other. Together they agreed they would head home anyway, and if they hadn't switched back by the time they arrived at each other's houses, they would kill time somewhere nearby instead.

"Wow... So this is how the world looks through [Aoki's eyes], huh? Man, he's tall! This is my first time in [his body], actually. He's gotta be, what, one-seventy?" [Aoki] (Nagase) rambled excitedly without a hint of tension.

"Keep your voice down..." Taichi paused, then quickly thought better of his warning. "Then again, even if someone overhears you, I guess they probably won't know what you're talking about anyway."

"Oh, wow! Yui looks so tiny from up here!"

[Aoki] (Nagase) reached out to pet Kiriya, but she quickly jerked her head out of reach, then sidestepped away.

"Huh?"

"Oh..."

There was a moment of silence—a heavy silence too awkward to laugh off.

[Aoki] (Nagase) smiled sheepishly.

"It... It's not what you think, Iori! It's not like I don't want you touching me. It's just that you're in [Aoki's body] right now, so—"

"I know, Yui. I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"...Good thing Aoki's not here to see this or he'd be crying himself to sleep tonight," Taichi muttered, feeling sorry for his friend.

"It... It's just a reflex at this point! Not my fault Aoki always tries to make a

move on me!” Kiriyaama replied earnestly. “But just so you know, I don’t, like, hate his guts or anything. He may be stupid, but he’s not a bad guy!”

Taichi had meant his comment mostly as a joke, so he wasn’t sure how to respond to her honesty. “O-Oh, okay... That’s good.”

But before they could clear the awkward tension, Kiriyaama’s city-bound train pulled into the station, and she stepped aboard.

In the end, Taichi and [Aoki] rode their train all the way to Aoki’s station. Normally Taichi wouldn’t have disembarked until a stop later, but seeing as Aoki and Nagase still hadn’t switched back, he decided to stick around and help her kill some time.

At present, the five members of the CRC were switching bodies a total of approximately eight times per day. Each switch lasted anywhere from one minute to two hours, so it was likely Aoki and Nagase would swap back relatively soon.

The station was deserted. Taichi and [Aoki] (Nagase) sat down on opposite ends of a bench on the railway platform, leaving an empty seat between them.

To his right, Taichi could see the familiar face of a close friend—someone who wasn’t present at the moment. Instead, it was his *other* friend... his closest female friend.

“I really screwed up...” [Aoki] (Nagase) finally whispered, like she just couldn’t hold it in anymore. She’d been quiet and miserable all through the train ride, too.

“What, the thing with Kiriyaama just now? Eh, it was just bad timing, that’s all. I wouldn’t worry about it too much.”

“I understand how you could see it that way, but... I just... I can’t. I need to be careful not to seriously upset anyone... I have to... I just have to...”

She fell silent, looking uncharacteristically mournful. This wasn’t just about making Kiriyaama uncomfortable. Taichi got the distinct sense that there was something more to it.

“Uggghhh...” [He] collapsed back against the bench and buried [his] face in

[his] hands.

She seemed so weak and fragile, like she might just fall apart if he wasn't around to keep her together... and he wanted to be there for her.

"What's wrong, Nagase? Anything I can do to help?" he asked, but [Aoki] (Nagase) didn't respond, unmoving.

A moment passed. Realizing his gaze was probably making her uncomfortable, Taichi looked away. Then, finally, Nagase broke the silence.

"...Taichi?" [Aoki] (Nagase) asked in a tiny voice.

"...Yeah?" Taichi answered slowly.

"I, um... Ever since we all started switching bodies, I've been going through all the used bookstores, hunting for all the body-swap stories. You know, manga and stuff like that."

"Oh yeah?"

He couldn't quite see where she was going with this.

"And out of everything I found, sure enough, most of 'em featured guys and girls switching with each other... And in most of *those*... Once the girl's in the guy's body, nine times out of ten, she ends up [bleep] his [bleep]!" (Nagase) exclaimed, grinning. "So, I think maybe I ought to [bleep] a guy's [bleep]—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! What does this have to do with Kiriama?"

"Pffft! Nothing, obviously! God, you're such a dork."

"What the—I thought we were having a serious moment here! Give me back all the brain cells I wasted thinking maybe this conversation was going somewhere!"

She was always quick to change tack. At what point during her abject misery had she started formulating this stupid joke in her head?

"The thing is, even if I wanted to [bleep] a guy's [bleep], I don't know the first thing about how it works. So I was thinking, maybe you could [bleep] how to [bleep] your [bleep]..."

"Don't just ignore me! Also, I don't know exactly what words you're 'bleeping'

here, but I assure you, I'm not going to [bleep] how to [bleep] my [bleep]!"

"But if I try to [bleep] a guy's [bleep] without the right knowhow, I might [bleep] his whole [bleep]...!"

"Aagh! Look, as long as you don't [bleep] a guy's [bleep] in the first place, you won't *have* to worry about his [bleep] getting [bleep] as a result of you [bleep] his [bleep]!"

"I admit, you have a point. If I choose not to [bleep] a guy's [bleep] in the first place, then I won't have to worry about his [bleep] getting [bleep] as a result of me [bleep] his [bleep], but if I can't [bleep] a guy's [bleep], then won't I end up [bleep] unless I... wait, what?"

"Nagase, you just wanted an excuse to say 'bleep,' didn't you?"

"You got me..."

"Gah! I knew it!"

"C'mon, admit it! You had fun saying it with me!"

...He couldn't deny it. It was a ton of fun, actually.

"No, but for real, I won't [bleep] anyone's [bleep]. You wouldn't want me doing that in your body, right?"

"Of course not."

"Then I won't," [Aoki] (Nagase) replied with a grin—a happy, radiant sort of grin.

Then Taichi realized.

"Were you hunting for body-swap stories because... you were trying to research what to do—?"

"Okay, Taichi, it's time for Nagase Iori's question of the day! Bum bada bum!" Nagase hastily interrupted, her impromptu fanfare a flimsy disguise for her embarrassment.

She could be downright depressed one minute, then giddy and excitable the next; her seemingly spur-of-the-moment clowning around was often carefully calculated; and she could tell a dirty joke without batting an eye, then turn on a

dime and blush over something entirely inconsequential. Indeed, Nagase was a colorful character in every sense... and Taichi found it all quite attractive.

But then, Nagase's expression shifted—into something he wasn't quite sure how to interpret.

“We all have this tacit understanding that we're each defined by our personality, or consciousness or 'soul' or whatever. Which is why, even though my 'soul' currently exists in [Aoki's body], the rest of you still see me as Nagase Iori. But the problem there is, it's kind of impossible to establish where our personalities—or consciousness, or souls—begin and end. After all, they're completely intangible.” There was a distant smile on [Aoki's] face. “So while we believe our soul, consciousness, or personality is what defines us as 'us,' we actually discern each other based on our physical forms. Which is why, no matter what crazy hijinks we get up to while we're switching bodies, no one outside the CRC ever suspects a thing.” (Nagase) continued on like she was presenting a thesis. “In other words, our [physical bodies] form the absolute basis of who we are. But once that [body] loses its significance—say, through the process of a body-swap—how do we continue to define ourselves? Is it even possible?” She paused. “Just kidding.”

She started to laugh, but just then, [Aoki's] eyes drooped shut. The next moment, [he] snapped awake again.

“...Whoa, what?! Oh, hey, Taichi!” [He] looked down at [his] body. “Hmmm... Yep, looks like I'm back to normal. Dude, I'm so glad to have [my body] back!” He blinked. “Now that I think about it, man, that's not something a normal person would ever say, huh?”

Evidently the swap had ended. Taichi was so distracted, he just nodded along to whatever Aoki said. His mind was completely overwhelmed by that moment with Nagase just now. Her blank expression, her monotonous tone, her unusually philosophical commentary—it was all just so far removed from the normal her.

What exactly was she trying to get across to him?

The more detached she acted, the more it came across like a desperate cry for help... or maybe it was all just in his head. He had no way of knowing for

sure.

He wanted to understand... but he just didn't.

Chapter 5: Soliloquy of a Jobber

Monday, just after first period...

Yaegashi Taichi (might have) (maybe) mentioned the recent incident with Nagase Iori to one Inaba Himeko. He kept his tone casual, of course, lest it inadvertently turn into a bigger deal than he intended... but Inaba took the matter quite seriously.

She propped her elbow up on the desk and rested her chin on her hand. "Hmmm... So *that's* how the cookie crumbles, eh?" she muttered ominously.

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"I meant exactly what I said! Good grief... I just hope things don't spiral out of control."

"Okay, well, now what does *that* mean?"

"For fuck's sake! Do you have a brain?! Then use it! Or better yet, why don't you go ask her yourself?!"

Inaba gave him an angry shove, and he stumbled forward a few steps. Before he could stop himself, he made eye contact with Nagase, who was halfway out of her seat.

Nagase grinned and sauntered over. "What's going on, folks? You guys horsing around over here?"

"No, no, it's nothing. Say, Nagase, about last Saturday, when we were on the way home..."

"Yeah? What about it?" She shot him her most dazzling smile, as though she genuinely had no idea what he might be referring to—a smile so dazzling, in fact, he started to question if maybe it was all in his head. Maybe she hadn't actually meant anything by it.

"Oh, uh... Actually, never mind." He decided he was probably just overthinking it.

Behind him, Inaba clucked her tongue in frustration.



This ordinary, uneventful weekday took a sharp turn when, at the end of fifth period, an ominous atmosphere manifested in the classroom. At first glance, the room seemed to carry on as usual, but occasionally, amid the playful banter, the students of 1-C would pause to cast furtive glances in one singular direction.

The source of this palpable anxiety was none other than Inaba Himeko, who was currently exuding a malicious aura that (figuratively) screamed “I’m in a shitty mood! Stay the fuck away from me unless you want an ass-kicking!”

There was no telling what might set her off, so it was crucial that they maintain a careful and respectful— “C’mon, Inaban, turn that frown upside-down,” said Nagase, plunking down in the seat just in front of Inaba’s and rattling the chair impatiently. Her audacity had the entire class on edge; Taichi could hear whispers (and a few startled not-so-whispers) from every corner of the room.

“Holy shit!”

“Did she just say that?!”

“Damn, girl, you’re fearless...”

“Somebody get the bomb squad in there already!”

By “bomb squad,” they meant him—which is why he was standing by on the scene.

What happened, you ask? Simple: At the beginning of fifth period Japanese literature class, Inaba Himeko and Yoshifumi Aoki had switched bodies. Then, partway through the lesson, [Inaba] (Aoki) had fallen asleep. The teacher noticed this and promptly smacked [Inaba] over the head with a textbook. When [she] awoke, Inaba found herself back in her own body (though it wasn’t clear whether she’d switched back at precisely that moment, or at some point during the nap).

“What kind of teacher would hit *me*, of all people?! What a disgrace...!”

How's the weather up there on your high horse? Taichi snarked silently.

“Now, now, Inaban. You gotta let these things go! It's all in the past! Save your anger for the real culprit behind this!”

“Nagase! Are you trying to get Aoki killed?!”

“...You make a good point. Heh heh heh... He'll pay a heavy price for this...” Inaba licked her lips and grinned so evilly, she put the average cartoon villain to shame.

All at once, the rest of the class began to shriek in fear.

“Eeeek!”

“Someone defuse her, ASAP!”

“Relax! We're not in any danger... I think!”

“Hurry up and do your job, bomb squad!”

Apparently the rest of the students had stopped taking this seriously.

“That's funny... I think I heard some blatantly offensive remarks just now...” said Inaba, whipping her head around.

“Nope! Pretty sure you were just hearing things, Inaba!” Taichi jumped in, dutifully maintaining his reputation as “the bomb squad.”

Just then, the bell rang, heralding the start of sixth period homeroom, and their class advisor, Gotou Ryuuzen, hurried into the room—a marked change in demeanor compared to his usual laid-back sluggishness. “Back to your seats, everyone!”

Taichi and Nagase waved goodbye to their disgruntled clubmate and returned to their desks.

Gotou pointedly cleared his throat for some reason. “Okay, uh... Listen up, kids.”

He seemed weirdly tense. Then, as though he'd practiced an entire speech in advance, he suddenly blurted out: “As I'm sure some of you already know, our school regularly participates in a local volunteer trash cleanup event. But hardly

anyone actually wants to take part in it, so we typically end up sending the athletic clubs out on rotation. However, due to extenuating circumstances, playoffs coming up, scheduling mishaps, et cetera, we're unfortunately a little short on volunteers this time around. So, excluding the third years, who are all busy studying for college entrance exams, we're tasked with the job of recruiting a minimum of three volunteers from a total of three first-or second-year classes."

A palpable sense of unease filled the room—but the students of 1-C held out hope. They waited with bated breath for Gotou to continue.

"In order to determine which three classes would be asked to offer up volunteers, we held a staff-wide rock-paper-scissors tournament, which I managed to..."

He paused and looked around the room at each of them, letting the tension build until the anticipation nearly killed them.

"...lose."

"You dumbass!"

"How could you lose?!"

"Don't get our hopes up like that, you pile of crap!"

Sure enough, their worst fears were realized, and they promptly hailed him with a barrage of vicious insults.

"I wasn't *trying* to lose, okay?! The point is, I need three students from our class to sign up for this! You guys decide who volunteers, please! Oh, and if you try any funny business, like a boycott or something, *all of you* will be required to participate in the next one, you got me? Fujishima, you handle things from here! Volunteers will be meeting up after school by the gates!" With that, Gotou skedaddled out of the classroom like a bat out of hell.

"S-Sensei?!" Fujishima Maiko, president of Class 1-C, looked up in alarm.

"Look at that! He ran off!"

"Do your job, you coward!"

"You call yourself a teacher?!"

But their indignant cries were in vain, for Gotou was already gone.

“Haah... Well, alright then... Does anyone want to volunteer? ...No, of course not... Okay, is anyone *willing* to volunteer? Raise your hand.”

With the responsibility dumped unceremoniously on her shoulders, Fujishima stood at the teacher’s lectern, resigned to the task at hand.

Unsurprisingly, not a soul raised their hand for this. There was nothing to be gained from doing it, so naturally, no one in their right mind wanted to waste their time.

“You do it.”

“I can’t! I’m busy with club stuff!”

“Dude, everybody at this school has ‘club stuff’ to deal with, okay? You aren’t special.”

“If the sports teams are stuck with it 99% of the time, I say we make the fine arts clubs deal with it just this once!”

“Why does it matter what kinda club we’re in?!”

All at once, everyone immediately tried to pass the buck off. At first, Fujishima tried to take everyone’s feedback into consideration before making the final decision, but everyone was so petty about it, she quickly threw in the towel.

“Haah... Alright then, you people can decide for yourselves. And if you can’t, we’ll settle it with a rock-paper-scissors tournament.”

The peanut gallery didn’t take well to this.

“Oh, great! Now *you’re* gonna pass off your work, too?”

“Don’t put yourself on a pedestal!”

“Okay, fine! I’ll go ahead and assign myself to the first slot. Now we just need two volunteers. Happy?”

“Atta girl, Fujishima!”

The class instantly applauded her. Talk about mood whiplash.

Regardless, Fujishima was a competent class president... which made the recent discovery of her more sultry (and, to Nagase, terrifying) side all the more fascinating.

Then it hit him.

If this were a more glamorous sort of volunteer activity, they might have had more luck—but as things stood, no one was going to sign themselves up for what basically amounted to extra trash duty. The buck would continue to get passed... and from there, it was likely a matter of time before the responsibility was foisted onto those who weren't brave enough to make their case.

But if that somehow didn't happen, and they were instead forced to decide by rock-paper-scissors, it was entirely possible the duty would fall to someone who genuinely couldn't afford to take up the task. Sure, perhaps they'd make an exception for that person, but in doing so they were liable to start another argument.

At this rate, no matter the outcome, someone was bound to suffer as a result.

Then he realized what he'd known all along: there was precisely one solution.

It was so simple. If someone was forced to do it, then why not take up the task himself? That would solve everything. Granted, there would still be one final slot left, but at least this way he could spare someone the misery.

He exhaled, squeezed his eyes shut, and slowly raised his right hand.

"I'll do it."

His voice came out all funny.

Oh no.

He opened his eyes.

The lectern had moved—no, he had moved.

And that meant...

"Oh, um... [Inaba-san]... I take that to mean you'll volunteer...?" Fujishima asked, blinking like she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

At this point, Taichi was used to the body-swap and everything it entailed.

After a moment of surprise, his brain promptly kicked into gear.

Man, of all the crazy timing...

He turned and looked at [Yaegashi Taichi].

“Uh... Count me in, too,” [Taichi] (probably Inaba) piped up, [his] right hand in the air, [his] left hand currently flipping the bird in [Inaba’s] direction under the desk.

When Gotou returned—to mass booing, no less—sixth period homeroom came to a close, and school officially let out for the day.

“Yaegashi I can at least kind of understand, but Inaba? No way!”

“Inaba-san’s been acting super weird today, don’t you think?”

“These days *all of them* are acting weird!”

Ignoring the murmurs of their classmates, [Inaba] (Taichi) stalked over to [Taichi] (Inaba) to discuss the task at hand.

“Uggghhh! Today is the worst day of my life, I swear to God!” [Taichi] (Inaba) grumbled under her breath, careful not to be overheard.

“Look, uh... Again, I’m really sorry about this, okay? If you have to be mad, save it for whoever decided to swap us right as I went to raise my hand.”

“Yeah, after what happened with Aoki, I have to believe the person behind this is intentionally fucking with us... but that doesn’t get you completely off the hook for this, got it?” [Taichi] (Inaba) snapped.

As for Taichi himself, he was mildly surprised to discover just how fearsome [he] could look if he put his mind to it.

“I’ll make it up to you, okay? Promise.”

“Hmph! Trust me, I’m gonna get even, alright.”

Apparently she cared more about getting revenge than righting a wrong. Not very chill of her.

“C’mon now, [Taichi], quit mean-muggin’ your friend here! You’re gonna draw suspicion if you keep acting out of character. Now let’s see that smile!” Nagase

pinched each of [Taichi's] cheeks and pulled [his] lips into a forced smile. "Wait, what? That's kinda creepy... Oh, I get it. Smiling isn't in Taichi's character, either..."

"Then knock it off. You're wasting everyone's time."

Admittedly, it was kind of hard to watch someone mess with [his own face]...

"Enough shenanigans. Fujishima's glaring at us," [Taichi] (Inaba) pointed out through stretched lips.

[Inaba] (Taichi) whirled around, and sure enough, Fujishima was staring at them, her arms folded across her chest. Ordinarily she was a sweet girl, but with that look on her face... she was terrifying.

At Fujishima's behest, Taichi and Inaba left the classroom.

"Have fun picking up all that trash! Buh-bye!" Nagase called to them, before promptly dashing off to the Rec Hall.

With their bookbags stored safely back in the classroom, they headed for the school gates—Fujishima in front, and the other two trailing behind.

A moment later, [Taichi] (Inaba) lightly elbowed [Inaba] (Taichi).

"So tell me. Is Fujishima always this bitchy toward you?"

"Yeah... Ever since that day me and Nagase first switched bodies."

"Guess I can't blame her, since [you] technically felt her up and all... Plus, I get the sense she plays for the other team, so maybe she has a crush on Iori. I mean, she walked in on a cute, innocent girl fondling her chest in private... So yeah, maybe she sees you as competition. Oh man, that's kind of hilarious, actually..."

"No, it really isn't!"

Ahead of them, Fujishima turned on her heel sharply.

"Can I borrow you for a moment, [Yaegashi-kun]?"

"Sure, wh—" [Inaba] (Taichi) responded reflexively.

"*Need me for something?*" [Taichi] (Inaba) cut in loudly, elbowing [Inaba]

(Taichi) sharply in the ribs. [He] strode over to Fujishima, then turned and mouthed “Moron!” in [Inaba’s] direction.

That was dangerously close... It was proving hard not to respond on instinct whenever someone called his name... And Inaba was a lifesaver for stepping in like that. As far as he was concerned, she had more than earned the right to nag the rest of them.

“Something’s been on my mind lately, so I’m just going to cut right to the point. What’s going on between you and Nagase-san?”

“Wha...?!” [Inaba] (Taichi) yelped in surprise.

The question was ridiculously blunt, especially with a third party present. Fujishima Maiko was not to be underestimated.

“You two were all over each other today... and you stole her from me the other day as well...”

“Not sure what you expect me to say,” [Taichi] (Inaba) hesitated. [He] glanced back over [his] shoulder—then [his] eyes lit up with a sudden idea. “Definitely something heterosexual, though!”

Oh my god.

“You’re lying, aren’t you?”

Welp, so much for that.

Fujishima had seen right through her.

“Wh... What makes you think I’m lying?” [Taichi] (Inaba) stammered, clearly caught off-guard.

“Please. Who do you think I am? With my expertise, I can tell at a glance whether a girl’s been tainted by a man’s touch,” Fujishima replied, calmly adjusting her glasses. Her omniscience was palpable—though whether this was ultimately a good or bad thing, Taichi couldn’t say for sure.

“Wow... Guess you leave me no choice. I’ll have to be completely honest with you,” [Taichi] (Inaba) growled hotly.

Meanwhile, the real Taichi was desperate to quash this situation before it got

out of hand—but there were no brakes on this train. Besides, even if he were to cut in and deny it, as far as Fujishima was concerned, surely [Taichi’s] word would trump anything [Inaba] had to say about it...

“Okay, well, we’re... within arm’s reach of something heterosexual, at least!”

“Within arm’s reach, you say...? Pretty close, then, I take it... This might be more critical than I realized...”

“Sorry, but I’m gonna need you to back off and leave Iori alone, got it?!”

“Right back at you, I’m afraid. I refuse to hand Iori off to some manhandler like y—”

Sensing that the conversation was about to take a dangerous turn, [Inaba] (Taichi) hastily wedged [herself] in between the two of them. “Okay, stop right there! Seriously, that’s enough!”

[Taichi] (Inaba) clucked [his] tongue, and Fujishima scoffed. Meanwhile, [Inaba] (Taichi) sighed heavily.

Once the “volunteers” (victims) had gathered by the gates, the teacher in charge gave a brief rundown of the event, which basically amounted to just “Go pick up a reasonable amount of litter from somewhere in the vicinity of the campus, and if we catch you trying to filch random junk from people’s garbage cans to pad out your haul, rest assured you won’t like the consequences.” Each student was allotted a trash bag and a pair of work gloves (as well as trash tongs, for some), then sent off on their way.

As Fujishima had gone off to be with a friend from another class, Taichi and Inaba ended up wandering off campus without her. Underneath a cloudless blue sky, they milled around the ridiculously large public park just a few blocks from the school.

“Haah. Great. Me and you, stuck on a garbage date,” [Taichi] (Inaba) muttered, idly clacking her trash tongs.

To be fair, it was the perfect weather for a stroll around town. Excluding the litter cleanup element—not that they really could as much as they wanted to—it did kind of feel like a date, more or less.

“Oh well, not much choice n—”

In one moment, Taichi’s vision went dark, and the next instant, his perspective had changed.

Finally, they were back to normal.

“...Oh, sure, NOW we switch back! Man, this is the pits. Alright, Taichi, give me my bag back,” Inaba grumbled bitterly, snatching the bag from his hands.

“Aw, c’mon. Lighten up.”

“YOU lighten up! Thanks to you people, my perfect reputation is in shambles. Six months of work, destroyed in just a few short hours! Lying, cheating, stealing bastards!”

“Oh, wow! That last part just now totally reminded me of pro wrestler Eddie Guerrero’s famous catchphrase!”

“Keep your obscure references to yourself, dipshit.”

Well, maybe this “dipshit” just felt like saying it! Is that so wrong?!

“Okay, think of it this way: by falling asleep in class, you’ve proven you’re not infallible! Now people can relate to you! I’ll bet your reputation has totally skyrocketed, actually.”

“Who gives a shit about that? The way I see it, I’ve just given my enemies more ammo to use against me. God, I’m pissed.”

“Enemies? Who do you mean?”

“Anyone who isn’t me, pretty much.” Inaba smirked. “Ooh, now here’s a real catch!” Using her trash tongs, she hauled up a limp, rain-soaked magazine and stuffed it into her garbage bag.

“Your definition of ‘enemies’ is a little alarming... Wait, why are we talking about this?! Explain to me what happened with you and Fujishima back there! How could you tell her that?! I’m not trying to pick fights with anyone in our class, damn it!” Taichi snapped.

But Inaba simply scoffed.

“Excuse me? You should be thanking me! I made your intentions known, and

now all you have to do is whisk Iori away from Fujishima's evil clutches."

"And why would I do that?"

"What? Don't play dumb with me. This is the perfect opportunity for you, isn't it?"

Inaba paused and shot Taichi a meaningful look—a mix of understanding, pity, kindness, anger, frustration, and, if he wasn't misreading her, a fair bit of envy, too.

"You goddamn martyr."



“...Martyr? What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

Whatever she thought she was implying, he genuinely couldn’t see it... and yet there was a tightness in his chest he couldn’t quite explain.

“Exactly what it sounds like. It’s the perfect way to describe you, wouldn’t you say?” Inaba declared, shooting him a sidelong glance.

“Perfect how?”

“Okay, let me ask you this: Why the hell did you volunteer yourself for this bullshit in the first place?”

“...Well, nobody wanted to do it, but *someone* was gonna have to, so I figured I’d handle it myself so no one would have to suffer—”

“Except you, though, right? I know you weren’t excited to do this shit. So now *you’re* suffering... but it doesn’t count when it’s you, is that it?”

“Well...” Taichi struggled to answer. Surely he had *some* kind of response to this... but he couldn’t seem to find it. It was buried somewhere, lost in the haze of his mind.

“And there you have it. You’re a goddamn martyr. Why is it that you don’t see yourself the same way you see everyone else? Why are you somehow the exception? I’m not saying you think you’re better than us. Quite the opposite, actually. You think you’re worse, which is why you’re totally cool with sacrificing yourself for the sake of someone else. I can’t begin to understand how someone could undervalue themselves like that. Frankly, it’s disgusting.”

This was far more caustic than her usual vitriol, and it stung.

Then, out of nowhere, she changed the subject.

“So why do you like pro wrestling so much?”

For a moment, he was caught off-guard—but when it came to discussing his favorite hobby, his mouth started to move of its own accord.

“...Well, let’s see. Fans of the genre call it ‘kayfabe,’ but I guess ‘suspension of disbelief’ is the more common term. See, pro wrestling is completely scripted, so you’re not actually fighting your opponent. Instead, you compete by putting

on a show for the audience. It's not a matter of having the strongest or coolest moves—the crucial part is how your opponent 'sells' those moves. Your opponent's acting skills can affect the success of a given technique, or heck, even the whole show! You literally can't have a pro wrestling match without it. What I like best are the jobbers—the wrestlers who basically exist to get their butts kicked. I'd say my favorite—"

"Shut the fuck up, you goddamn fanboy," Inaba sneered disdainfully.

"Wha... You're the one who asked!"

"I never asked for your entire thesis, you fucking fanboy!"

"C-Can you please quit calling me that?"

"Anyway! The point I'm trying to make is, maybe the jobber thing is actually a reflection of your obsession with self-sacrifice."

"No, you're not getting it, Inaba. The point of a jobber is—"

"I don't mean in general. I'm talking about you personally here."

"You're still wrong, though..." And yet, somehow he couldn't say it with 100% confidence. Was Inaba just that intimidating, or did part of him agree with her, somewhere deep down?

"I'm wrong, am I?" She sighed. Maybe she felt better now after getting it all off her chest. She lowered her gaze to the ground, hauled up an empty snack box between her tongs, and stuffed it into her garbage bag.

By this point Inaba had built up a sizeable collection of trash, but Taichi had yet to pick up a single item.

"So, back to the topic at hand. You have feelings for Iori, right?"

"Bwuh?!" Taichi choked.

"Man, you've really started to wear your emotions on your sleeve lately. You used to be the silent type, too!" Inaba chuckled to herself. Evidently she was pleased to see she'd gotten a rise out of him.

"I mean, what did you expect?! How is that even tangentially related to 'the topic at hand'?! We can't go 'back' to a topic we never visited in the first place!"

“What are you talking about? I told you earlier, you need to swoop in and take Iori for yourself before Fujishima beats you to the punch.”

“And I ‘need’ to do this why, exactly? I don’t see the point in competing for her! ...I mean, why should I ‘take her for myself’ in the first place?”

“Don’t you get it? Out of everyone in the CRC, Iori’s the most fragile. I’ve never seen someone as unstable as her in all my life.”

A memory flashed through his mind—the time he and Nagase spent together while she was switched into [Aoki’s body]. She’d expressed so many different emotions during that short timeframe—but was it just her colorful personality, or was she actually as “unstable” as Inaba claimed?

“And you’re a sucker for the fragile type, right? You tell yourself you gotta be her big, protective shield. Otherwise she might break, y’know? So she’s the perfect match for a goddamn martyr like you.”

“...Stop acting like you’ve got me all figured out, okay? I’ve never once thought that way.”

While Inaba was admittedly rather sharp, he wasn’t about to let her act like she knew him better than he knew himself.

“Suuure you haven’t,” Inaba muttered to herself, swinging her trash tongs in the air. “God, you’re so frustrating. Apparently you’re not even conscious of it... Oh, and while I’m at it, you should know... Iori has feelings for you, too.”

“I really doubt that,” Taichi shot back dryly.

“Tch... What kind of weaksauce reaction was that? You were supposed to go ‘BWUH-HUH?!?!’ or something!”

Apparently Inaba had her own ideas about how this conversation was meant to play out.

“I can react how I want, okay? Besides, I know you’re just talking out of your ass again.”

“Rude much? Trust me, I wouldn’t say this shit unless I had proof. Iori... She needs someone to be her rock. Someone who’ll be there for her and tell her she’s valid no matter what. And I know you’re dying to be that guy, Taichi, you

little worm. You're both damaged goods, but you each have what the other's missing. Sounds like a match made in heaven, if you ask me."

Harsh.

"Okay, now you're crossing the line—"

"Besides, you two really come alive when you're together," she added, looking away.

"We do...?"

After that entire snarky tirade, her sudden sincerity was a little disorienting.

"Either way, it doesn't really matter to me. It's between you and her, so you can handle it however you feel is best. Not my problem... Sorry for being a nag," she mumbled sheepishly before speeding off. It was unusual of her to apologize, but at least she had a degree of self-awareness.

She was normally so forthright with her opinions—often to the point of scathing sarcasm—but as far as Taichi could recall, she'd never gotten quite this personal with anyone before. Was this another effect of the body-swap phenomenon?

"Still..." Inaba muttered. She normally carried herself so confidently, and yet her expression seemed uncharacteristically anxious—mismatched like an art-class cut-and-paste collage. "I really do think Iori's the most at risk out of all of us."

"What do you mean, 'at risk'?"

"Don't get me wrong. This body-swap nonsense has the potential to destroy any one of us," Inaba explained quietly. "But the most likely victim is Iori. She's the one who stands to lose the most."

"I don't know... Sure, this body-swapping business definitely has its downsides at times, but *destroy us*? Bit of an exaggeration there, don't you think? I mean, okay, we have no way of predicting how things will turn out, but is it really something we should be stressing out about? We've only ever run into, like, minor complications at worst. The longest swap lasted a little under two hours at most, and the majority of them are way shorter than that! And

that's kinda all there is to it, really, when you think about it! We're doing fine!" Taichi said easily.

But Inaba didn't take kindly to this. Quite the opposite, in fact.

"How fucking braindead are you?!" she spat viciously—then stopped short and stared at the ground for a moment, trembling with rage. "Do you seriously believe that shit...?! How can you be so lax at a time like this?! I swear, you're the biggest fucking dolt in the club. Maybe all the pain from being a martyr has made you numb or something. This situation we're in? It's *extremely fucking precarious*. This is a *crisis*, Taichi. It's *hopeless*. We can't predict when someone might get hurt, and things could fall apart at any time. Don't you GET that?! *Nothing about this is 'fine'!*"

Inaba looked up, her eyes wide and full of venom. She was always a bit of a grump in general, but she was never one to act rashly. No matter how angry she got, she made sure to keep a handle on it.

But right now, she was so livid, her emotions were completely out of control.

Not that Taichi could blame her. Here she was, trying to warn someone about the present dangers they faced, only for that very someone to turn around and shrug it off like it was nothing. Who *wouldn't* lose their temper after that?

He'd always thought of the body-swap as at least somewhat risky—there were plenty of instances in which that proved painfully true—and yet at some point he must've convinced himself there was a way for them to insulate themselves from the damage.

"...Inaba, I'm really sorry," Taichi blurted out.

She smiled awkwardly. "Nah, it's fine... I probably said a lot of things I shouldn't have. Today's simply put me in a bad mood, that's all... I'm sorry too." She pursed her lips together and looked up at him—a look of trepidation that he had never seen from her before, a somber look magnified by her long lashes. "Will you forgive me?" she asked in a tiny, feeble voice.

For once, she really did look the part of a delicate flower.

As Taichi struggled to process what he was seeing, he somehow forced his mouth to move. "...What's there to forgive? As far as I remember, all you did

was state the truth... Yeah, I wouldn't worry about it too much."

At this, she smiled in relief—a rare unguarded moment that made his heart flutter.

"A-Anyway, let's get going! Gotta get this crap over with!" Taichi blurted out, too embarrassed to look her in the eye. But after just a few steps— "Man, you really are as dumb as a sack of hammers, aren't you?" Inaba muttered behind him. "Your trash bag got blown away in the wind a while back and you never even noticed."

".....What?"

Taichi looked down at his gloved hands. The garbage bag he should have been holding was now noticeably absent.

"...Did you happen to notice when it happened?"

She grinned from ear to ear. "It happened when I asked about your feelings for Iori. The exact moment you went 'BWUH,' as I recall."

"That was forever ago! Why didn't you say anything?!"

"Because I thought it'd be funny, that's why."

Just like that, Inaba was back to her usual twisted, sadistic self.

Chapter 6: Low Blow

A few days after the volunteer cleanup...

Rec Hall Room 401 was currently occupied by two members of the Cultural Research Club: Yaegashi Taichi [as Inaba Himeko] and Aoki Yoshifumi [as Kiriya Yui]. The [girls] were currently chuckling to themselves over a couple of videos they had just finished recording on their cell phones.

One phone showed [Kiriya] looking tearfully into the camera. “I... I always lashed out at you because I was trying to, like, hide how I felt... but the truth is... I’m, like, in love with you, Aoki. Sorry, I know this is, like, totally random...”

On the other, [Inaba] stared shyly at the floor. “I... I’m, um... I’m in love with you... So please... if you’ll have me... Please make me yours...”

The girls of the CRC were currently off on an errand. Technically, Nagase, Taichi, and Aoki were meant to handle it, but then Inaba and Kiriya got switched into [their bodies]... So while the girls were busy elsewhere, the boys of the CRC (specifically, Aoki) came up with the unfathomably stupid idea of using [the girls’ bodies] to say things they wanted to hear Kiriya and Inaba say in real life.

“Oh man, this is so good! The contrast between [Inabacchan]’s tough, guyish personality and the shy sweetness of her speech... Hits me right in the feels!”

In reality, the shyness was little more than a result of Taichi’s own embarrassment, but evidently Aoki was into it.

“As for yours... Well, you weren’t exactly subtle about what you want, huh?”

“Guilty as charged! Man... I hope she’ll say it f’real someday...” [Kiriya] (Aoki) muttered. Admittedly it was weird to see [Kiriya] talking about “herself” in the third person.

“You’re pretty dead-set on her, huh?” Taichi was genuinely impressed by his dedication in the face of how cruelly she treated him.

“Of course. My heart’s tellin’ me she’s The One, you know? I can’t explain it—well, okay, I guess technically I can. I mean, she’s cute, and cheerful, and pure, and innocent, and downright stubborn at times... and a total *tsundere*...”

That last part sounded like wishful thinking on Aoki’s part.

“But the biggest part of it is... my gut. When I first saw her, it just hit me out of nowhere,” [Kiryama] (Aoki) explained, nodding to himself.

“Well, that was fun,” said [Inaba] (Taichi). “We’d better delete the videos before they get back.”

“Gimme a break!” [Kiryama] (Aoki) replied, shaking his shoulders exaggeratedly like a stand-up comedian. He grinned. “We’re only just gettin’ started, buddy!”

“But...”

“Okay, never mind then.”

[Kiryama] (Aoki) backed down rather quickly this time around considering how aggressively he’d convinced Taichi to help him film the first one... Then, out of nowhere, he started humming, like he was waiting for something.

“...I mean, if you really, *really* want to, I guess we could...” Taichi conceded.

God, I’m such a creep...

With the start of their second filming session, the two idiots were more hyped than ever. They had plenty of time until the girls got back, so they figured they may as well enjoy themselves to the fullest.

But this carelessness was their downfall.

For right then, the door opened. [Taichi] (Kiryama) and [Aoki] (Inaba) had returned from their errand earlier than anticipated.

[Inaba] (Taichi) and [Kiryama] (Aoki) froze.

The girls almost certainly hadn’t overheard their conversation, so if their brains had been functioning properly, they could surely have made up a timely excuse. But the boys had been so heavily infatuated with their little game, they’d completely let their guards down.

This meant they needed a few seconds to recover from the surprise.

And the girls of the CRC knew exactly what that meant.

“Yui! Seize that phone!” [Aoki] (Inaba) commanded.

“Got it!” [Taichi] (Kiryama) bolted forward at [Kiryama] (Aoki) with slick, agile movements Taichi didn’t realize his body was capable of making.

[Kiryama] (Aoki) let out a pathetic shriek and recoiled, but [Taichi] (Kiryama) whipped the phone out of his hand in an instant. Then she turned and handed it to [Aoki] (Inaba).

“Now then, let’s see what you were doing with my phone... Hmm? You guys took a video?” [Aoki] (Inaba) pressed Play, and the room went dead silent as the cringey recorded lines blared from her phone’s speakers.

As she stood there, perfectly still, Taichi could have sworn he heard a blood vessel in her forehead pop.

“Wow. What an *intriguing* little experiment!” [Aoki] (Inaba) pulled off [his] blazer, then [his] tie, then began to unbutton [his] shirt.

They watched in baffled horror as she whipped off both [his] button-up and undershirt, revealing [his] bare chest. Then [his] hand moved to [his] belt.

“Wh-What the heck are you doing?!” [Taichi] (Kiryama) finally blurted out, blushing bright red.

“Isn’t it obvious? I just thought I’d go streaking around campus.”

“Y-You’re joking, right, Inaba?” [Inaba] (Taichi) croaked hoarsely, unable to comprehend the level she was clearly willing to stoop to for the sake of revenge.

“I don’t know, am I? Heh heh heh...”

“P-Please don’t do it, Inabacchan! It’s social suicide! For [me], at least!”

“Y-Yeah, c’mon, Inaba! You wouldn’t *really* go that far, would you...?”

”

Surely even Inaba wasn’t *that* heartless— “*Perish.*”

—Never mind.

“I’m begging you, Inaba-san! If you make me commit social suicide, I may as well actually die!” [Kiryama] (Aoki) pleaded on [her] knees.

Meanwhile, to Taichi, the sight of headstrong [Kiryama] begging [Aoki] was really something else.

“Shut the fuck up! After the humiliating shit you asswipes did in [my body]?! It serves you right!”

In the end, after much bickering, the three of them (Kiryama, naturally, had taken the boys’ side) were finally able to calm Inaba down.

By the time peace had returned to the clubroom, everyone had switched back into their own bodies. (More accurately, peace returned *because* of the switch, as Inaba had lost her chance to go streaking.) “Next time you two pull a stunt like that, you’re dead meat, got it?”

“Yes, ma’am. We’re sorry,” Taichi and Aoki recited together.

“Just to be clear, I’m not happy with you either, okay? Next time I catch you doing this, I’m for real gonna kick your butts!” Kiriyama said with a large, mirthless smile.

Taichi trembled. “Understood, loud and clear.”

A “butt-kicking” at Kiriyama’s hands could probably send both of them to the hospital...

“That doesn’t sound fun... Well, okay, maybe a little...” As usual, Aoki was running his mouth like an idiot. “Oh yeah, that reminds me. I’ve been wonderin’ about somethin’...” He hesitated for a moment, then continued. “Yui, are you kinda scared of us? Whenever I’m in [your body], I feel myself kinda flinch anytime Taichi or I come close. Or any guy, pretty much.”

Taichi tilted his head in puzzlement. “What?”

Apparently Aoki’s observation wasn’t far off the mark. Kiriyama froze as all the blood drained from her face. She stared forward into space, unblinking, unmoving, like her whole system had just crashed.

Then she suddenly jumped back to life and forced a smile. "...Wha... Huh? O-Of course not... As if I'd ever be afraid of a... a couple of idiots like you. I mean, I'm... I'm invincible! I could kick your butts anytime I want! So yeah... I'm not... scared of men!"

Her voice was as stiff and robotic as her expression. It was obvious to anyone listening that she meant precisely the opposite of everything she said.

Kiriyama clutched at her shoulder with one hand as though she were staving off a bitter chill. Long strands of chestnut hair lay over and under her tightly clasped fingers, contrasted against the stark white of her dress shirt.

She hung her head, hiding her expression behind a curtain of hair. In that moment, she seemed smaller than ever... and Taichi was hit with the powerful impulse to help this sad, lonely girl smile again.

At the same time, it still felt so unreal. After all, she'd never shown any signs... or maybe he simply hadn't noticed them. And maybe he hadn't noticed because he never thought to look.

Aoki jumped to his feet. "I'm so sorry!" He bowed his head. "All this time, I kept goin' on and on about how much I care about you... but I didn't even notice... I'm so dense, I never would've figured it out without this crazy body-swap stuff... God, I've probably hurt you dozens of times by now... I'm... I'm such a stupid piece of trash!"

It was clear from his voice that he deeply regretted everything he had done.

Kiriyama looked up suddenly. Her eyes were usually so spirited and brave... but now they were full of tears. Her shapely brows were furrowed in anguish. Stray strands of hair stuck to her rosy pink lips. She looked at Inaba, Aoki, and Taichi in turn... and then, before anyone could stop her, she bolted for the door. It all happened in a split-second, her long brown hair and skirt fluttering behind her as her muscular legs carried her through the door and down the stairs.

"Yui!" Aoki called out belatedly, preparing to chase after her. But before he could, Inaba flung out her right arm, blocking his path. "Inabacchan?!"

"I'm glad you finally put two and two together, but man, your timing sucks... Then again, based on her reaction, I'm guessing the timing isn't the main issue..."

I'm surprised, though. Are these latent fears really ingrained in our [bodies]? I knew about it, but I didn't really notice it much when I was [Yui]. Maybe some people are more sensitive to it...? In your case, maybe you have a strong intuition to make up for that empty head of yours..." Inaba muttered to herself, scratching her head with her free hand.

"You knew about this, Inaba? What's going on with Kiriya?" Taichi asked, forcing his brain to process everything that had just unfolded in front of him.

"Of course I knew. I'd have to be braindead not to notice... Sorry, that was a little harsh. To be fair, she's pretty good at hiding it. Based on how she normally acts, most people would never even guess... except for me, obviously. It's pretty serious, too. Anyway, I'm not gonna go into detail. If you want to know, ask her yourself."

"Then let me go find her," Aoki retorted, wrestling with Inaba's blocking arm.

"I wouldn't if I were you. It's too soon, and you'll just make things worse. You know Yui tends to get a little overly emotional. Let me go calm her down instead."

There was a moment of silence as the two glared at each other. Then Aoki caved.

"...Fine... Thanks, Inabacchan."

"All I can do is cool her down. You guys are going to have to fix this yourselves later. And that includes you, Taichi," Inaba called out, turning her sharp gaze on him next.

He flinched. "A-Alright," he nodded.

She squinted at him suspiciously for a moment, then turned away and pulled out her cell phone. "I saw this coming. I knew someone was going to get hurt... but it doesn't have to leave a scar unless you let it."

With that, she walked out the door, leaving Taichi and Aoki behind.

"Guh... I'm so stupid... It's legit infuriating how freakin' dense I am... Uggghhh... I hate myself sooo much right now... I never knew how Yui felt... I

never even realized... I only noticed once I was literally in her shoes... I'm such a dick..." Aoki groaned, pressing his cheek to the table.

"It wasn't 100% your fault, though. Even Inaba was impressed with how well she was hiding it. And at least you noticed! I didn't feel a thing when I was [Kiryama]!"

"Nah, you had to be in the right place at the right time to feel anything, dude. And even when I *did* feel it, it wasn't super obvious at first... Haah... Man..."

This revelation turned their whole world upside down. Would they have been better off never finding out? Taichi turned this over in his mind for a moment, then decided against it. As Kiriyama's friends, this was something they were always fated to notice and confront eventually—it was just a matter of when and how. And ultimately, things hadn't gone too well.

"Thinkin' back on it, there were signs, though. Like, think about it. All this time, do you ever remember her touchin' you, or vice versa? And I don't mean during the body-swap."

"Hmm... No, not really... but at our age, it's not really that strange to keep your distance from the opposite sex, is it?"

"Mmmm... Think about it this way. In the CRC, we got grouchy ol' Inabacchan punchin' everybody's lights out. And then there's Iori-chan, who loves to give people hugs and massages and stuff. So there's a lot of touching happenin'."

Aoki had a point there. The five of them were so close-knit, it was rare for gender to get in the way of their friendship, and they were all pretty touchy-feely with each other (but not in a weird way).

"And if touchin' each other is totally normal between us, then ain't it kinda weird for Yui to go out of her way to avoid it, considerin' how feisty she can get? Plus, Inabacchan's got that 'disciplinarian' role goin' on, but wouldn't it make more sense for Yui to do it, since she's the overemotional karate girl?"

"I just assumed she wasn't the type to lash out... Oh, wait... She did throw those cookies at me the other day..."

"And she kicked that weighted memory foam pillow at me."

Taichi thought back to the events that had transpired in Inaba's room that day.

"I'm not sayin' she has to hit us, obviously. Just that somethin' kinda feels off about it, is all."

There were other signs, too. Like the day [Aoki] (Nagase) had reached out to touch her on the train platform.

"Aoki, you're actually pretty sharp, you know that?"

"When it comes to the girl I love, I pay attention."

For once, Aoki sounded like a total badass.

"Even in times like these, you just don't let anything shake you, huh?" Taichi muttered.

"That's just how I roll, man. 'Living for the moment,' or whatever."

"Must be nice."

"You jelly?" Aoki joked, grinning like a bratty kid, to which Taichi smirked. He continued, "Nah, I get what you're sayin'. With all the body-swappin', and «Heartseed» showin' up, and all the other crazy stuff, you're like, 'Time to wake up and be serious for once!' Right?"

"Sounds more like something Inaba would say," Taichi retorted.

"Either way, it's just not possible for a guy like me. My outlook ain't fragile enough that the body-swap could damage it."

"Your 'living for the moment' outlook, you mean?"

"Yeah. When it comes down to it, that's all that matters to me. To me, it don't matter what your long-term goals are. As long as you're givin' it 100%, you're already winnin' at life," Aoki declared, utterly unruffled in the face of Taichi's sarcasm. "When I'm on my deathbed, I wanna be able to look back on my life and say to myself, *man, what a ride*. That's why I try to just laugh off this whole body-swap thing if I can. 'Course, I know it's a lot to ask... and it's already hurt Yui..."

Taichi began to wonder if Aoki was actually the most level-headed and stable

one of the group... though admittedly he knew his opinion wasn't the most reliable in this case, considering he didn't have his own life figured out whatsoever.

Suddenly, Aoki looked up and shouted, "Whoa, man, what am I waxin' philosophical for?! I ain't the smart guy here!"

"Aoki, have you always been this cool? Man, this sucks..."

"You bet! ...Wait, huh? What sucks about it?!"

"I dunno... I always thought you were just a dumbass..."

"Wow, rude. A-Anyway, that's just what you get for underestimating me, or somethin'! Dang it... First Inabacchan, and now this..."

"Speaking of Inaba, she really took me to task the other day..."

"Aw, that's nothin' new."

Wow, he just doesn't even care...

"No, I mean, like... way worse than normal. She basically ripped me a new one..."

"Whoa... I've never seen you get so down about it before... You always seemed like the kinda dude who's quick to let this stuff go... Well, Inabacchan can be a bit of a prickly pear, y'know? If you wanna talk about it, I'm all ears."

After a moment of hesitation, Taichi took Aoki up on his kind offer and told him about the "goddamn martyr" conversation (minus the part about Nagase).

"Oho, I see... Uh huh... Aha... Now I get it... Mm-hmm..." Aoki nodded as though it all made perfect sense. "Y'know, I think I see where she's comin' from on this one. 'Martyr' really hits the nail on the head. Man, she's smart."

"You *agree* with her?" Taichi asked, crushed.

"Just hear me out here, alright? I mean, I think my personal philosophy is pretty sweet. Someone else might look at it and go 'Man, your priorities are jacked.' But in the end, no matter what other people say, I ain't gonna change it. I know I said some tough-guy crap like 'my outlook ain't fragile,' but it's not like I do anything special to protect it. It stays the same on its own. And that's

just the kind of guy I am. People may change like crazy on the outside, but on the inside, it's a lot harder than you'd think. Sometimes people may *look* like they've changed their tune, but that's just it—it's just a surface level change. And as chance would have it, I happen to be the kind of guy who don't change much on the outside. That's all it is."

His voice was casual, yet firm. While he definitely hadn't changed much on the outside, to Taichi, he seemed like an entirely different person somehow.

"Anyway, sorry for the weird tangent. My point is, you should figure out what kind of guy you are, what your outlook is, then stick to it. Maybe there are some things about being a martyr that you should work on fixin', but I'm sure it's gotta come with some perks too, right? And if you can't fix it, then that's just the way it is. Happens to everyone, y'know?"

Maybe giving in didn't have to always be such a bad thing. Maybe his only option was to accept it, reflect on it, and ultimately move past it.

"Man, you're incredible. Seriously."

Aoki seemed to have already figured out a ton of things it would take the average person—including Taichi himself—years to understand.

"Aw, c'mon, you're makin' me blush! I mean, real talk, you're way cooler than I am. In terms of raw potential, you're lightyears above me!"

"The heck is 'raw potential' supposed to mean?"

"Look, I don't expect an airhead like you to get it, but basically you're awesome, alright? If you weren't, you never would've earned the title of 'martyr' from Inabacchan. And plus, I get the feeling you could handle Yui better than I could... I just... Now that we know her secret, I don't have the first clue how to even talk to her anymore..."

Now that they knew, there was no way of un-knowing. So how would it change them? And what were they meant to do about it?

"Yeah... I'm not sure how we can help her..."

"See? That's what I'm talkin' about. You're thinkin' on a whole different scale! Like, you're over here thinkin' about how to help her. Meanwhile, I'm too tied

up tryin' to figure out how to make our friendship last another day!"

"Hey, c'mon. I'm no superhero or anything."

"But the scary thing is, you might actually figure out how to fix her... And if you do... Aw man, she's totally gonna fall head over heels for you! Crap, dude... I can totally see it happening!"

Evidently Aoki had an active imagination.



As usual, it came out of nowhere. One minute Taichi was sitting in the living room, enjoying some post-dinner TV with his little sister Rina—and the next, he was lying face down on a bed in an unfamiliar room.

His vision was swimming, and he could feel his nose dripping. He sniffed... and felt something roll down his cheek. Wiping the tear with the sleeve of his oversized pink T-shirt, he gingerly dried his eyes.

He could feel a tightness in his chest that he couldn't explain.

Evidently he had switched bodies with someone again.

Struggling to adapt to his new, much smaller frame, Taichi got out of bed and walked to the red heart-shaped mirror sitting on a nearby shelf.

[Kiriya Yui] looked back at him.

[Her] eyes and nose were swollen pink, [her] chestnut hair was limp and lifeless, and [her] usual babyface looked a bit haggard—the kind of look that would make anyone instinctively want to reach out and protect [her].

Inaba's words floated through the back of his mind.

—This situation we're in? It's extremely fucking precarious. This is a crisis, Taichi. It's hopeless.

—We can't predict when someone might get hurt, and things could fall apart at any time.

Now, for the first time, Taichi understood just what sort of damage the body-swap was truly capable of.

Had Kiriya spent the whole night crying? Or had her tears subsided at

some point, only to come flooding back again? Or... was she crying over something else entirely? Taichi was shedding [her] tears, but he didn't have the first clue why. The body-swap may have put him in her shoes, but it didn't afford him a peek into her mind.

Unsure what to do next, Taichi rubbed [her] eyes again, then dropped back down onto [her] bed. The fluorescent lighting was too bright; he held a pale hand up to intercept it... but despite all the years of karate plainly etched into every finger, in that moment, it seemed far too small to protect her from much of anything.

He knew Kiriya never meant for anyone else to witness these tears... much less step into her body and feel them in person. Was it okay to infringe on her privacy like this? Of course not—and under any other circumstances, this would never have happened in the first place.

But... what if the body-swap could have a silver lining?

What if he could shoulder the burden of the stinging pain in her eyes, nose, and chest? It wouldn't be more than a trifle compared to the bitter heartache she must've felt... but surely it was better than having to bear it all alone, right?

Humans were bitter animals. They tended to complain, and curse their fate, and imagine fanciful what-if worlds that didn't actually exist. They could shrug off their problems as impossible, and everyone else would simply let them. But that was just escapism masquerading as letting go. What appeared to be objective observation was in fact nothing more than empty air.

But to look for the silver lining? That took real courage. And to conflate it with blind optimism would be a grave mistake. Looking for the silver lining didn't mean throwing your hands up and simply hoping it would all work out somehow. No... To find the silver lining in something, you actually needed to look. Hard.

Would Inaba forgive him for meddling if he did so with a full understanding of their supposedly "hopeless" circumstances?

As he thought about this, a music box ringtone began to play. Taichi sat up and dug around until he located the source of the sound—a pale pink cell phone lying on the bed. He picked it up and checked the caller ID: Yaegashi

Taichi.

When he answered, a (somewhat) familiar, yet (somewhat) unnerving voice spoke on the other line: his own.

“Hey, uh... This is Taichi, right?!” asked, well, [Taichi] (Kiriyaama).

“Yep, it’s me.”

“You’ve probably figured it out by now, but this is Kiriyaama! So, um, you probably noticed I was crying, but, like... don’t worry about it or whatever. Just forget you saw anything, okay?!”

He could hear the desperation in her voice. It was only natural to want to ask someone to forget they saw something you didn’t want them to see in the first place. And if he quietly turned a blind eye to what he’d witnessed, he could at least act like he’d “forgotten.” But that wasn’t a real solution. It was a temporary measure at best.

That said, he didn’t blame her for wanting to sweep the whole thing under the rug. At least that way she could be sure she’d have peace of mind, even if just for a few moments. The world was full of little moments you had to shrug off or else you’d never survive it alone.

He understood that... and yet, at the same time...

“I can’t just forget,” Taichi replied.

The first step was to accept it.

On the other end of the line, he heard [Taichi] (Kiriyaama) inhale sharply. He could practically see the look on her face.

“If anything, I think *you* should forget it,” he continued.

The next step was to reflect on it.

He had yet to come up with any concrete solution, but at least he was honest about what he wanted from her. They could just start from there.

“...What...? That’s... That’s stupid...”

He could hear the sob in her—well, [his]—voice.

“Can we meet up somewhere?” he asked, knowing words alone wouldn’t be

enough.

This way, she could start to move past it.

Walking in the darkness meant stumbling blindly, tripping, scraping knees, unsure where you're headed—maybe even plunging off a cliff if you weren't careful.

But was it really so stupid to believe in a light at the end of the tunnel?

Taichi couldn't help but want to rescue her from that darkness.

8:30 PM. Night had descended over the town.

Kiriyama said she wanted to stay out of the public eye, so they chose to meet up at an old park they were both familiar with, located about halfway between their houses. It was a bit far, but within biking distance. Thankfully, they both knew the area well enough that they had no trouble navigating unfamiliar neighborhoods to get there.

The park was furnished with a bench, a see-saw, and a sandbox, dimly lit under the streetlamps. Designed only to fill an empty space between houses, it was a bit too cramped for kids to play baseball or even a game of tag.

At this time of night, the park was utterly forgotten—few passing pedestrians or cars, no delinquent gangs. Its only inhabitants were two figures on bikes: Yaegashi Taichi and Kiriyama Yui... piloting each other's bodies.

Taichi had been worried he'd find her crying, but [Taichi] (Kiriyama) seemed calm. [He] was still wearing the outfit he'd changed into after school: T-shirt, thin blue jacket, sweatpants.

"Taichi, I'm sorry, but I think I made your sister suspicious," [Taichi] (Kiriyama) blurted out the moment they laid eyes on each other.

"Uh oh... What happened?"

He imagined she must've been pretty panicked at the time of the swap. After all, she'd been crying at the time.

"It was just so sudden... I mean, it's always sudden, but this time around I got a little overly freaked, and your sister was like, 'What's the matter with you

lately, Big Bro? Do we need to get you to a hospital?’ ”

“Oh god, she’s already talking about having me committed...?” Not good. He’d have to come up with some kind of cover story. “Oh well, that can wait. Anyway, listen, KiriYama—”

“Let me guess. Is this about what happened today?” [Taichi] (KiriYama) cut in.

“Yeah, actually.”

“Right before we switched, I got a phone call from Aoki. He said there was a bunch of stuff he wanted to talk about in person, but for now he needed to get something off his chest... And then he apologized, like, a billion times. No joke.”

Evidently Aoki had already taken action before Taichi had even decided what his next move would be.

“I don’t know why, though, considering it was my fault in the first place... I thought to myself, *ugh, now Aoki and Taichi are totally gonna walk on eggshells around me*... I felt so pathetic and awful... I started thinking about how we’d never be able to have fun anymore, and... it hurt so bad, I started crying... I’m sorry... I’m sorry I’m so weak...”

Though she was unmistakably [Taichi] on the outside, the aura of sorrowful fragility was unmistakably hers. It was a vibe Taichi was sure he couldn’t recreate even if he tried.

“No more ‘sorry,’ okay? You have nothing to apologize for.” He paused. “Actually, let me get one in real fast. I’m sorry, too.” He was tempted to specify why, but it struck him as a little gauche, so he didn’t.

KiriYama didn’t ask for details, either. She simply nodded.

“So, uh... Androphobia, huh?”

Saying it out loud made the weight of the issue all the more apparent. It felt like way too much for one person to bear alone.

“...Yeah. I’m okay talking to them, but if they get too close, or if they try to touch me... it’s pretty bad. I start shaking and stuff... Hahaha...” [Taichi] (KiriYama) laughed weakly, like she was trying to convince herself it was no big deal.

“How long have you had it? I mean... something must have triggered it, right? Can I ask what happened?” [Kiryama] (Taichi) asked, looking [Taichi] (Kiryama) straight in the eye.

[Taichi] (Kiryama) snorted and looked away. “You sure never beat around the bush, do you, Taichi?” she mumbled.

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Not necessarily... Just a little concerning,” [Taichi] (Kiryama) commented vaguely, though Taichi didn’t follow her meaning. “Guess that’s just the kind of guy you are... Alright, I’ll make an exception for you. Just FYI, you’re the second person at school I’ve ever told. Inaba was the first.” Her voice sounded a little brighter now. “I know this is a lot of lead-up, but just so you know, it’s not actually some crazy story or anything. It’s the same kinda stuff that happens to a bunch of people, nothing special.” With that disclaimer, [Taichi] (Kiryama) took a deep breath and continued. “When I was in middle school, a man tried to rape me.” Pause. “It’s not as serious as it sounds, though. I mean, he tried, but nothing actually happened. I fought back and got away.” She kept her gaze pointedly averted. “But at the time I was this kickass karate girl, you know? I thought I was invincible. Heck, I’d been picking fights with boys since grade school and won every time. So I always figured, if anybody tried to force themselves on me, I could just beat ‘em to a pulp. But then, once it actually happened? Totally different story. It took everything I had just to make a break for it... Turns out adult men are *really* strong. Hopelessly strong, compared to a preteen girl. And that was the moment I thought to myself, *no matter what I do, I’ll never stand a chance against a man.*”

[Taichi] (Kiryama) looked up into the night sky, and [Kiryama] (Taichi) followed suit, gazing up at the perfect half moon.

“I’d lost my share of karate matches against older girls, but it never once made me think ‘Oh, I’ll never, ever beat this person.’ And yet somehow I felt that way about any old average guy. That was around the time puberty finally kicked in for the guys in my classes, and they were starting to get taller and stuff... So every time I remembered how powerless I was against them, I would get freaked out. It felt like men and women were completely different species, and that only freaked me out more... And once I noticed one little difference, I

started to see all the other minor differences, which magnified it even further... Gah, I'm so stupid."

"You're *not* stupid. After what you went through, I can't blame you for feeling that way."

As a man, Taichi knew he could never truly understand exactly how she felt, but he could imagine it, at least.

"...So yeah, from that point on, I saw men as these indecipherable alien creatures. For a while, just being around them would turn my stomach... but thankfully that didn't last long. Pretty soon I got to the stage I'm at now, where I can hold casual conversations and mess around. It's just... If they get too close, or too touchy-feely, well... it activates my fight-or-flight response, I guess."

"So when you're goofing off with me and Aoki, it doesn't activate, I take it?"

"As long as I know I have room to escape, yeah."

The average conversation typically took place in fairly close proximity, though...

"I wonder what it is... I don't think I was traumatized by the attempted rape itself, but... I guess because he was overpowering my arms at the time, I came away with this belief that *once a man grabs you, it's all over*. It's funny... You'd think I'd understand myself a little better than this, but... Well, anyway, that's my story." [Taichi] (Kiriya) bowed as if to conclude her performance.

Her pain was deeper and more ingrained than Taichi ever imagined. Thankfully she didn't treat all men like monsters—but she still saw them as threats on a subconscious level, to the point that her body and rational mind were entirely at odds. Her potential for getting over it was... less than ideal, to say the least.

...The fact that his train of thought went straight to "getting over it" was probably a sign of his dogged optimism. He could only imagine what Aoki or Inaba would say if they were here.

Regardless, his feelings on the matter weren't important here—just hers.

"So, how do you want to handle it? Your... you know... androphobia." Maybe

it was an obvious question, but nevertheless, he wanted to ask.

“I’d rather not say...” [Taichi] (Kiryama) furrowed [his] brow and curled [his] lips into a familiar pained smile—one he’d likely seen on Kiriyama herself at some point.

“Okay, how about... what do you want for yourself in the future? Can’t hurt to dream, right?”

“But...” She faltered, conflicted.

“I want to help you,” [Kiryama] (Taichi) said firmly.

“...That’s the problem,” [Taichi] (Kiryama) retorted bluntly. She sighed, but not out of annoyance or resignation—something softer, kinder. “If I tell you, then you’ll see it as me asking you for help.”

The words pierced his chest and gripped his heart in a way most things never could—possibly because they were spoken by someone wearing his face. It felt like his inner self was communicating to him directly.

Was this the basis of who he was, ultimately?

“Is that... a bad thing?”

“No, but... I just really hate to burden other people with my problems. It makes me feel so guilty and pathetic and weak...” she muttered bitterly, her anguish now plain to see.

Man, it’s so awkward being human, Taichi thought to himself.

No matter how much you care for each other, it’s not the same as truly understanding one another. Your kindness ends up misplaced. Despite whatever good intent you may have, the other person may see it in a different light entirely.

And apparently no amount of body-swapping would change that. Mind-reading, maybe. Otherwise, if your friend decided not to use their words, well, you were left in the dark.

Thus, they needed to have the conversation. Put it all out in the open... and move past it.

“Personally, I think the real burden here is you having androphobia.”

He knew he’d put it harshly... but it was the honest truth, and he had to say it.

Sure, they could always just be there for her, watching from the sidelines as she worked through her fears bit by bit. And even if she didn’t find a perfect solution, at least this option would keep the peace, if only on the surface.

But Taichi had just shot that option in the foot, now that he’d called her fear a burden. Now they’d be forced to find a solution or else face a total breakdown of their friendship.

Predictably, [Taichi] (Kiryama) began to shake with rage. “How... how could you just say that?! A burden?! I never asked to be like this, okay?! I hate this just as much as anyone!”

Well, look at that. Take a chance on honesty, and sometimes the other person will return it in kind.

“Then let me help you.”

“Wha—?!”

“You just said you hate it, right?”

Don’t hide in half-measures. Confront it.

Accept it—but don’t run from it. Fight it.

“Wh... What are you even saying...? No, really... What’s your problem...? Mind your own business...” [Taichi] (Kiryama) mumbled, staring blankly.

As far as Taichi believed, at this point, if she still had yet to overcome it, then she wasn’t about to start anytime soon—not without facing it head-on. It was a hardline approach, but that was just his style—and it wouldn’t change, even if he wanted it to.

But most importantly, Taichi had hit upon a potential solution. If the body-swap could hurt, then maybe the body-swap could heal.

“Kiryama... You’re afraid that if a guy grabs you or uses his brute force against you, you’ll be powerless. Right?”

“Huh? Y-Yeah...?”

“And your body tends not to cooperate with you... whether it’s a subconscious thing or what, I don’t know, but it triggers your fight-or-flight response. Right?”

As he spoke, [Kiryama] (Taichi) walked forward, step by step, slowly closing the distance between himself and [Taichi] (Kiryama).

“Yeah...? Wait, what are you doing?”

“So, if we were to imprint on your subconscious that you’ll be fine even when a guy’s grabbing you, we could probably help you overcome your fear, right?”

“I feel like you’re oversimplifying this a little, but yeah, I guess...? Uh... I really don’t like that look in your eyes...”

They were now so close, he could hear her breathing. [Taichi] was only of slightly above-average height for a teenage guy, but from [Kiryama]’s perspective, he was a giant.

“I’m going to teach [your body] that you can overpower a guy just fine. Get ready, because it’s time for a little shock therapy.”

“Seriously, I can’t even with that look on your face. It’s starting to freak me out! Even worse considering it’s *not* your face, it’s [MY face]!”

[Taichi] (Kiryama) retreated back a step, [his] expression stiff with fear.

“Just trust me on this. Now, grab me.”

“O-Okay...” Timidly, [Taichi] (Kiryama) reached out and grabbed [Kiryama] (Taichi) by the shoulder.

Now that he was conscious of her fear, here in [Kiryama’s body], he could feel a distinct discomfort at [Taichi]’s masculine touch.

Meanwhile, Kiriyama looked at him anxiously. He grinned back. Then he took a deep breath and summoned all of his resolve.

Going through with this would mean hurting [his own body], but that wasn’t nearly as important.

Alright... Let’s do this.

And so, without further ado, [Kiryama] (Taichi) kneed [Taichi] (Kiryama)—

directly in the family jewels.

He felt something soft squish against [her] knee. *Eugh*. He wasn't even the victim here, but he couldn't stop himself from whimpering. Knowing full well how badly this would hurt, he'd exercised some restraint in dealing the blow, but the attack landed so perfectly it gave him goosebumps.

"Gghhck...!" With a guttural, almost inhuman groan, [Taichi] (Kiryama) collapsed to [his] knees, then fell forward on [his] face as though she'd passed out.

...Did I kill her?

It was a serious possibility.

No, wait, she's still moving. Whew.

"Nggah... ghhah... ggaahh... gggbbbhh..." Kneeling with [his] forehead pressed to the ground, [Taichi] (Kiryama) scratched at the dirt with one hand, all the while making a series of groans Taichi had never heard (much less uttered) in his life. [His] other hand was clamped over [his] mouth. The nausea must have kicked in.

[Kiryama] (Taichi) winced. It was far from pleasant, watching [himself] writhe in agony like this. That said, it had to be better than the hell Kiriyama endured.

Gradually, [Taichi] (Kiryama) began to relax, chest still heaving. [Kiryama] (Taichi) crouched down beside [him]. "See? It only takes one hit."

[Taichi] (Kiryama) whipped [his] head around and glared at [Kiryama] (Taichi) like he was the devil incarnate. [His] face was dripping with sweat, and there were tears in [his] eyes. "Th-That was... extremely... uncool of you... you *jerk*...!"

"But now you—"

At first, he thought he was seeing things.

But sure enough, the next moment, before he could even finish his sentence, he found [Kiryama] staring back at him... where seconds ago he'd been piloting [her body]... which meant...

Just as the realization dawned on him, a sharp burst of pain shot up from his crotch.

“AaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGGGGGHHHHHHHH!”

Oh god, it's all over! I'm never having kids!

He pressed his hands between his legs and rolled from side to side, hoping to ease the pain in any way he could... but it offered little comfort. A fresh wave of tears pricked up at the corners of his eyes.

“Wh-What the...? Oh, we switched back! Hehehe! Serves you right!”

“But now... waste of... ti...” Taichi could barely speak.



“Of course it was a waste of time, you idiot! Haah... That was the worst pain of my life... I thought I might like literally die from shock!” She looked up suddenly. “What the...? Oh, crap! Taichi, someone’s coming this way!”

He could hear the panic in her voice, but he was kinda busy trying to make it through the next few minutes.

“C-Come *on*! They’re heading right this way! W-We gotta get out of here...! Not that we’re doing anything illegal, but if they see us like this, we’re gonna have a heck of a time explaining ourselves! Now let’s go!”

She had a point, considering all the groaning and screaming they’d been doing... but...

“Look... Forget about me... Just save yourself... I’m a goner...”

“Quit joking around! Save the cheesy lines for the action movies! Now get on your feet!”

I wasn’t joking, though...

“No, seriously, I can’t do this... I don’t think I can stay upright, much less run...”

“Hey! You there!” a distant, feminine voice called out. Whoever it was, Taichi could hear a note of disapproval in her tone.

“Oh crap! Ugh, come ON! Hurry!”

Kiriyama yanked on his jacket sleeve, hoisting him up against his will, and he staggered to his feet.

“Ow, ow, ow! Give me a minute to—”

“Shut it! Get your act together and start running!”

With that, Kiriyama dashed off, dragging him with her.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!”

Damn, she’s fast... That’s a karate girl for you, I guess!

“GRAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!” Kiriyama let out a fierce roar as she shifted into high gear, hauling Taichi at full speed.

Their wild escape lasted a solid twenty minutes.

Before he knew it, they had arrived at the city's largest river.

"K-Kiriyama... This is... far enough... don't you think...?!" Taichi rasped, utterly out of breath. He couldn't bear to take a single step more. With Kiriyama in the lead, they'd run a considerable distance, and their "pursuer" was long gone (read: hadn't been chasing after them in the first place).

"Huh? Oh... Right." She finally slowed to a stop and exhaled, her petite chest heaving hard, but still steady. Evidently she still had gas in the tank.

Swallowing lungfuls of air like water, Taichi sent much-needed oxygen to his brain and willed his heartbeat to slow down. He needed to get the words out.

"Kiriyama... Look at your left hand."

"What?"

Her gaze descended, then settled on her hand... which was currently clutching Taichi's. At some point during the sprint, she had shifted her grip from his jacket sleeve to his hand. It made sense, of course; it wasn't easy, pulling someone by the sleeve at that speed.

"Wh... What the heck?!" She whipped her hand away and clutched it at her chest protectively, then took three steps back.

"Kiriyama... Look at you... You're fine," Taichi wheezed, smiling.

"I was just... It was an emergency, that's all! B-Besides, I... I can make an exception for you, obviously..." Kiriyama flushed pink, her gaze averted, rubbing her left hand in her right.

"But now we know... your androphobia... isn't as insurmountable... as you thought..."

Admittedly, he'd known from the start that she'd be brave enough to rise to the occasion. After all, she'd squared off against «Heartseed» when it was piloting Gotou Ryuuzen's body. Maybe her inhibitions were simply overridden in the heat of the moment, but at least now they had concrete proof that it was, in fact, possible.

At last, Taichi caught his breath. “Besides... you’ve seen for yourself just how devastating a low blow can be.”

Instantly Kiriyaama’s face burned bright red, all the way to her ears. “Yeah, no kidding! Wh... What kind of nutjob *are* you?! THAT was your genius plan?! You should’ve at least warned me ahead of time!”

“If I warned you, it wouldn’t be shock therapy, now would it? Besides, it seems like it did the trick just fine.”

“What—the—*HECK*—gives you the right to put a girl through that?! That kind of pain could traumatize somebody for life! Ugghh... I’m not even in your body anymore and I can still feel it dangling in my pants... GAAHHH! I can’t believe I just said that! God, I WANNA DIE!”

She certainly had a flair for the dramatic, this one.

“Alright, alright. Calm down, Kiriyaama.”

“Th-This is YOUR FAULT, got it?!” she snapped, flailing her arms, tears in her eyes, her face red as a tomato.

She was so cute, he felt a strange impulse to pet her. He nearly mentioned this, but then he imagined her loud, angry reaction and quickly exercised self-control.

Kiriyaama took a long, deep breath, then exhaled slowly. “Okay, admittedly... yeah, it hurt, like, crazy bad... but... Is that how it works for all guys, though?”

“Yep! Don’t worry. It’s not just me.”

“...Hmm... I see... Well then... If I did that, it would definitely put them out of commission, I guess... I mean, I’d heard about it, but I never knew it was that bad... Yeah... One shot and I’d have the upper hand for sure...” She began to practice a few knee strikes and punches. “As long as they don’t grab me from behind, or knock me out, I should be able to hit it from basically any angle... Yeah... Being grabbed shouldn’t be a problem, then...” As she practiced, it was clear she was envisioning her blows landing directly on a guy’s... most critical weak point.

“Oh no... Did I just inadvertently create a weapon of mass gonad

destruction...?”

She dropped out of her fighting stance. Clearly she was ready to— “I’ll work on it some more at home.”

—hone her skills even further?! *Yikes!*

“Wait... If it hurts that bad, then that means it’s kinda serious, doesn’t it...? Hold on... Why would you do that? Why would you hurt [yourself] like that, just for me?”

Her long chestnut hair danced in the autumn breeze. She brushed a strand out of her face and waited for his response. But as for the meaning behind the mournful look in her eyes, Taichi couldn’t begin to guess. Probably it meant a lot of things.

At her question, he reflected on his actions... and the answer he found was ridiculously simple.

“Because I wanted to. Is that so wrong?” he asked intently.

Kiriyama snickered. “Classic Taichi.”

She took two steps toward him, raised her fist up to her mouth, and blew on her knuckles. Then she extended her arm and bumped her fist lightly against Taichi’s chest.

...Her hand was trembling.

But she was smiling so brightly, he was sure she might just light up somebody’s entire universe.

“Thanks, Taichi.”

Keep going, Kiriyama. I’ll be rooting for you.

Chapter 7: Conclude and Begin Anew

The next morning, Yaegashi Taichi inadvertently discovered the identity of the third party who had witnessed that little incident that had taken place between him and one Kiriya Yui. This knowledge came to him when Fujishima Maiko, president of Class 1-C, shoved her finger at his face and demanded to know whether he'd been at the park last night with a girl. Evidently she'd passed by while walking her pet bulldog.

Naturally, he chose to lie about it.

"Wh-What are you talking about, Fujishima? I wasn't at any park last night!"

Lately it seemed as though fate itself kept trying to pull Fujishima into their affairs.

"Oh really now? So it wasn't you I saw squabbling with a small, long-haired girl?"

"I haven't 'squabbled' with anyone!"

"But you don't deny the rest of it?" Her eyes glinted sharply behind her lenses.

"I... I'm denying *all* of it, okay?!"

"Hmmm... Well, it *was* pretty dark, so perhaps my eyes were simply playing tricks on me. I apologize for jumping to conclusions."

He didn't have anything against Fujishima, and didn't enjoy lying to her... and now her apology weighed even further on his conscience— "Just when I thought I'd caught you cheating..." she muttered, looking away.

—Never mind.

Taichi had half a mind to point out he couldn't cheat on a girlfriend he didn't have, but Fujishima continued.

"I'll let it go, then. Oh yes, that reminds me. While I have you, I'd like to ask... Is something going on with you lately?"

“Whuh?! I mean, uh... you think so? Personally, I’d say I’m the same as ever.”

“Hmmm... It appears Inaba-san and Nagase-san have been acting strangely, too. As your class president, I’m concerned there might be some problem with your club.”

“I don’t think so...? Then again... It *has* been a full six months since we first met. Maybe we’re finally starting to be ourselves around each other...?”

“I see... That’s all well and good, then. But mark my words,” Fujishima replied, pointing her index finger in his face again. “One day your luck will run out, and I *will* find the chink in your armor.” With that, she turned and walked off.

Meanwhile, Taichi was starting to think he really needed to clear up her misunderstanding about him.

And that was when Nagase Iori walked up and sat in the desk in front of his. A desk that wasn’t hers. She fixed him with a long glare.

“You *suuure* that wasn’t you? Because ‘small, long-haired girl’ sounds an *awful* lot like Yui.”

“Wh... You were eavesdropping?! Look... The world’s full of small, long-haired girls, okay? It could have been anyone!”

If she’d witnessed his lie, he had no choice but to keep it up.

“Right. Well, either way, I guess it’s none of my business whether you were there or not... Man, that punk... Was she just making stuff up...?” Nagase muttered sulkily, pouting her lips.

Lately (provided no one had more pressing matters to attend to, of course) the five members of the Cultural Research Club had gotten into the habit of meeting up in the clubroom after school every day. After all, if they contained themselves to a single room, it would limit any potential trouble caused by the body-swap phenomenon.

Each had their own preferred activities. Inaba Himeko was always doing something or other on her laptop; Nagase liked to read manga; Kiriya had gotten really into bead crafts; Taichi usually caught up on his studies; and Aoki

Yoshifumi bothered each of them in turn with his desperate need for attention.

That day found Taichi in his usual habit of doing homework—and, surprisingly, Aoki had joined in. (Apparently he had an assignment due the next day.) Inaba glanced at them out of the corner of her eye as she typed. After they had all settled in, Nagase and Kiriya entered the clubroom.

“ ‘Sup, y’all!” Nagase flung her bookbag onto the couch before walking over to it. As she passed Taichi, she gave him a clap on the back. “Hi there, Taichi!”

“Guh! Why are you acting like you haven’t seen me all day? We just talked, like, fifteen minutes ago!”

“Aw, I was just going along with your vibe!”

“What? I didn’t even say anything! Clearly it was *your* vibe!”

Must be nice to be so easygoing.

And then he felt another, harder slap on the back.

“H-Hi there, T-Taichi!”

“Ow!” He whipped around to find Kiriya standing there, smiling shyly.

“Oh... Hey, Kiriya.” He smiled back at her. A moment passed; meanwhile, she continued to slap his back over and over. “C-Could you maybe chill out with that?”

At his request, Kiriya finally pulled her hand away, though he was pretty sure he already had a bruise, or at least some redness. “Listen, Taichi... I’m kinda starting to get back into martial arts and pro wrestling and all that stuff. We should talk sometime,” she told him quietly, almost like she couldn’t quite believe what she was saying.

“Sure, no problem!” Taichi exclaimed, leaning in. “Heck, we could start right now if y—”

“I’ll pass for right now!” Kiriya blurted out, shaking her head and holding her hands up in a “settle down” gesture. “Some other time, though.”

Aw, no need to be shy, silly!

It occurred to him that perhaps her androphobia was part of the reason she’d

gotten so obsessed with cutesy things. Maybe she'd wanted to run away to a world where men couldn't follow.

As he considered it, he realized Nagase, Inaba, and Aoki were all staring at them, mouths agape.

"...What's goin' on with you two?" Aoki asked, his expression hardening.

"Uhhh... Well..." Unsure where to begin, Taichi glanced at Kiriya.

"Nothing! Nothing at all!" she blurted out hastily, her cheeks bright red, as she hurried to the chair at the opposite corner of the table and began to dig through her bookbag.

Meanwhile, the other three continued to gape at them. Aoki looked between Kiriya and Taichi; Nagase stared dully at Taichi, eyes hooded, the rest of her face still hidden behind a volume of manga.

Awkward...

Still, if Kiriya wasn't comfortable talking about it, then he wasn't about to push it. Clearing his throat, Taichi turned back to the table.

"I... I gotta go to the bathroom!" Kiriya blurted, jumping to her feet and dashing from the room. Apparently the atmosphere was a little too tense for her.

Nagase waited until she was gone, then muttered, "That's funny. We already stopped by the bathroom just before we got here."

"What's goin' on here, Taichi?! Did somethin' go down between you two last night?! She seemed totally diff'rent on the phone yesterday!" Aoki howled.

"Nothing 'went down,' okay? We... We just *talked*, that's all. Hardly any different from whatever phone call you guys had."

"How'd you two get so buddy-buddy after one measly *talk*?! When it comes to me, she never even... Dang it, I knew you'd be my biggest competition! And it's even worse considering you aren't even trying! That's it... Iori-chan! We need to plan our strategy!"

"Wh-What's any of this got to do with me?! Not sure I see how I factor into this, personally!"

As Aoki and Nagase started to bicker, Inaba leaned forward across the table with a look in her eye that said she wasn't about to let him off the hook. "So. What actually happened?"

"Like I said, it was nothing major! Seriously! I just gave her a little encouragement, that's all. The rest was all her."

It was the truth, after all.

Inaba blinked a few times, then let out a soft chuckle. "Wow... So it turns out this body-swapping business actually has its upsides, huh? Then again, maybe part of it had to do with you being involved..." Somehow she seemed sincerely impressed. She smiled softly at him, then sat back in her chair and stared up at the ceiling. After a moment, she pressed both hands over her face. "I, on the other hand, only saw our imminent destruction..."

She sounded so... feeble.

And as it turned out, that was no coincidence—for that was the day Inaba collapsed.

"Okay, I've got an errand to run. In the meantime, you be a good girl and get some rest. If Gotou-sensei shows up before I get back, tell him I say hi." With that, the school nurse Yamada Momoka (age 30, divorcée) left the infirmary.

"Inaban... I thought you died...!" Nagase whispered, teary-eyed and anxious.

"I'm not gonna die from a little dizzy spell, dummy," Inaba retorted as she lay on the infirmary bed.

Nagase had been a little overly panicked the whole way here.

Kiriyama sighed, looking utterly exhausted. "That nearly gave me a heart attack... You hit the floor like a sack of potatoes!"

"I've just been feeling a little under the weather lately... It's no big deal. Honestly, I don't really need to be here."

"Shame on you, Inabacchan! You need to take better care of yourself!" Aoki scolded, for what was probably the first time in his life.

"Yes, Mom," Inaba responded sarcastically.

A short while later, Gotou Ryuuzen walked into the infirmary. As advisor to Class 1-C as well as supervisor for the Cultural Research Club, Inaba's well-being was his responsibility.

"Hey there, Inaba! You doing alright? Oh, hey, I see we've got the whole club in attendance." He sounded rather chipper considering one of his students had passed out at school.

"Sorry to trouble you, Gotou. You may leave now."

"Like I said, you could stand to treat your teachers with a bit more... Eh, forget it." Apparently he was willing to let it slide. "So, uh, where's Yamada-sensei?"

"She said she had an errand to run. According to her, and I quote, 'Inaba-san collapsed due to extreme fatigue. A little bed rest and she'll be right as rain.' End quote." Taichi explained.

"Thanks, Yaegashi. So tell me, Inaba, how are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," Inaba declared flatly.

"I see. Well, fair enough. I'm inclined to go with Yamada-sensei's recommendation, anyway. Now then... Seeing as I've got all of you gathered here, I might as well mention the other thing..."

"Oh!" Kiriya exclaimed as the realization hit her. "We haven't turned in the manuscript for this month's Culture Bulletin!"

"Oh," the other four said in unison.

Despite all the time they'd been spending together, their club had been the furthest thing from their minds. Still, the Bulletin was their sole task—the one function that served as a pretext for the CRC's continued existence.

"Oh yeah," Gotou piped up belatedly. "Come to think of it, you folks missed the deadline."

"Sorry, Gotou. We're kind of in the middle of investigating a pretty big lead right now, so I don't think we'll be able to submit this month's manuscript in time. Can we double the size of next month's issue instead?"

Inaba rattled off an excuse with no hesitation. Her ability to lie under pressure was sincerely astounding at times.

“Got yourselves a large-scale investigation, huh? But our agreement states the Culture Bulletin needs to be submitted on a monthly basis or else... Eh, forget it.” Apparently he was willing to let that slide, too.

For once, Taichi was sincerely grateful for Gotou’s dereliction.

At the end of the day, the other four members of the CRC decided that they needed to walk Inaba home, just in case. She insisted she didn’t need it, claiming that a four-person escort would be—in her words—*fucking obnoxious*, so instead they settled on a limit of two people. Thus, after a round of rock-paper-scissors, the winners were determined: Taichi and Nagase.

And so the three of them took the train, chatting idly all the way to Inaba’s stop. From there, it was only about a ten-minute walk to her house. As for Inaba herself, her complexion was still a bit pale, but her sass was already back in full force.

“Alright, Taichi, it’s time you told us what really happened between you and Yui yesterday,” she announced abruptly.

“*That’s* your segue? Just ‘alright, Taichi’? No preamble?!”

“Who gives a shit about preamble? Look, if you don’t tell me, I’m just gonna keep obsessing over it until I pass out all over again...!” Inaba slung her arm over his shoulders and collapsed against him like a staggering drunk.

“Nngh! Don’t use your health as blackmail! That’s cheating!”

“Besides, Iori wants to know, too. Don’t you, Iori?”

“Verily, as your trusted comrade, I must seek the truth of the matter,” Nagase replied in her best thespian voice.

“Huh?” Inaba whispered, tilting her head. Apparently that wasn’t the reaction she’d been expecting. “...Okay, well, there you have it. See? You heard the woman!”

“But... I’m not sure Kiriya would be comfortable with me talking about it...”

“Oh my god, you’re so frustrating! Look, if it was something personal, we wouldn’t be prying in the first place. We’re only asking because we know it’s

okay!”

“Yeah! If you won’t tell us, then I might start questioning how much we all really *trust* each other... and the emotional devastation might just knock me out, too...!”

“N-Not you too, Nagase! You’re both *terrible people*, you know that?!”

“Yeah... I...” Just when she’d gotten Nagase on board for her ploy, Inaba seemed to lose her momentum. She fell silent, grimacing. Was she feeling sick again? No, maybe this was something else... But before Taichi could ask about it, she looked up again. “Anyway, if you don’t start talking, I’m gonna scream ‘Help! He’s touching my body!’ ”

...It seemed he had no choice but to concede.

And so Taichi gave them the general overview of what he’d done to help Kiriyaama overcome her trauma.

Naturally, Inaba reacted exactly as expected. “Pffhahahaha! You sure have some crazy ideas, you goddamn martyr! That’s some shock therapy, alright! Good god almighty!”

But Nagase was a different story.

“I knew Yui didn’t like boys, but... androphobia...? She can’t even touch them? How could I not notice something like that...?” She stared at the ground and shook her head, swinging her silky ponytail. “I can’t even pretend to be a decent friend...!”

Where did that come from? Why was she overreacting? Taichi didn’t know.

“Nagase, listen to me.” He leaned in, and Nagase looked up to meet his gaze. Her damp eyes glittered like jewels. “I don’t think Kiriyaama wants us to feel guilty, or walk on eggshells, or make this any more awkward than it needs to be. I’m pretty sure she hates that kind of thing.” He remembered the way she looked yesterday, crying after Aoki apologized. “You don’t need to overthink this. Just treat her the same as always. I guarantee you that’s what she wants.”

In her shoes, Taichi knew he’d probably want the same.

“What do you mean... ‘the same as always’...?” Her voice shook.

“You know what I mean! Just talk to her the exact same way you always have. Look, I told you, you don’t need to think too hard about it. Just act natural and be yourself around her. I mean, c’mon... She always seems so happy when she’s goofing off with you.”

“Is... Is that really all I need to do?”

“Yeah, I’d say so.” He wasn’t just telling her what she wanted to hear—he sincerely believed it.

“Pfff... I knew it. You two are a match made in heaven,” Inaba cut in. “One thing’s for damn sure: you both need each other.”

“I-Inaban! Can you *please* quit bringing that up a billion times?!”

“Huh?” Taichi blinked. “What do you mean, ‘a billion times’?”

“She keeps going on and on about how we’re... you know... ‘hubba hubba’ or whatever!”

Did Inaba have the same “you two should hook up” conversation with her, too?

That would certainly explain why Nagase had been acting a little strange lately.

“Yeah, well, sue me! You guys *are* ‘hubba hubba’! I’m just telling it like it is!” Inaba paused. “Come to think of it, Yui’s probably got a baby crush on Taichi, too.”

“Bwaaagh?!” Taichi blurted.

“I-Inaban...! You don’t have to be so blunt about it!”

“What? It’s the truth! There’s something about a martyr that makes people get all weak in the knees. I mean, when you’re willing to sacrifice yourself for someone, they’re bound to get certain ideas, don’t you think? Anyway... Don’t you dare hurt Iori or Yui, you got that? Otherwise I’m gonna rip you a new asshole.” She hesitated. “And don’t forget... Sometimes kindness hurts, too.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” Taichi answered, saluting his captain.

“As long as it doesn’t turn into some love triangle nonsense... Oh, wait, Aoki

makes four... Alright, whatever. My point is, I don't care what you do, as long as it doesn't turn into a bloodbath."

Evidently Inaba had a lot of opinions on the subject.

Before long, they arrived at Inaba's house. Ignoring her protests, Taichi and Nagase walked her all the way to the front gate.

"Sorry for all the trouble today, you two."

"Don't worry about it. Just get some rest."

"Inaban, I know you're always fussing over the rest of us, but right now you need to focus on your health, okay?"

"I'll be fine... Seriously..." Inaba averted her gaze and smiled in a wry, self-deprecating sort of way. She walked through the fancy European-style garden to the front door... then stopped short and turned back. "Oh, that *reminds* me," she said pointedly. "I almost forgot... Iori, you should have Taichi fix you, too."

For Taichi, this comment came entirely out of left field—but he could tell the implication was serious, judging from the look of shock on Nagase's face.

"Inaban... You promised you wouldn't tell anyone..."

A chill ran down his spine.

Her voice was flat, her expression frosty like an ice sculpture.

He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"Taichi, I know you have what it takes. Help her out, would you?" With that, Inaba turned and strode off into the house, her back perfectly straight. Apparently she wasn't going to stop fussing over the others anytime soon.

With Inaba safely delivered to her house, all that remained was to head home themselves... and yet an uncomfortable tension hung in the air between Taichi and Nagase. Unfortunately, it had everything to do with Inaba's last little comment.

Do I ask about it? Do I confront it? Do I rise to the challenge?

The more he asked himself, the more it became clear there was only one answer.

“So, Nagase... what did she mean by ‘fix you’?” he asked, finally.

But Nagase ignored him and kept walking.

Rather than keep prodding, Taichi fell silent as well. Would she prefer they pretend like he never asked?

But then—

“She thinks she knows everything... She needs to mind her own business. I mean, yeah, I know she only does it ‘cuz she cares, and it’s usually the right thing to do anyway...” Nagase continued to stare straight ahead without meeting his gaze. “So, do you wanna hear my life story, Taichi? I don’t mind talking about it... but you have to promise you’ll treat me the same as always, no matter what.”

She kept her eyes on the road ahead of her, almost as though she was afraid to see the look on his face. Like a glass ornament that might shatter at the slightest touch.

What pain could she be carrying locked up inside? It felt too risky to cross the threshold when he didn’t know the depths of the darkness that lay beyond. Once he knew, he would never be able to un-know.

But no matter how great the risk...

“Okay, I promise. And I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

He had to accept it. That was the first step. And without taking that step, he was powerless to do anything. Without taking that step, he couldn’t even plan for a second step, much less “fix” her.

“I knew you’d say that.” At last, the tension broke, and Nagase smiled sheepishly, her joy and pain evident on her face. The sight gave him déjà vu—he was pretty sure Kiriama had smiled at him like that, too. But what was the implication there?

At her suggestion, the two of them sat down on a low concrete barrier that served to fence off a nearby parking lot. Nagase swung her legs forward with a

loud, exaggerated sigh.

“I don’t really super want to talk about this crap... and I know I should probably just keep it to myself... but after everything Inaban said, I pretty much have to tell you, don’t I? Otherwise you’ll just obsess over it nonstop.”

“Yeah... I admit, I don’t think I could ignore it, especially since she said I’ve ‘got what it takes’ or whatever.”

“Yeahhh...” Nagase kicked at a pebble, and it bounced right into the ditch. “Alright, let’s talk about it.”

Nagase held his gaze for a long moment, her eyes like black pearls. As it turned out, there was something truly awe-inspiring about a beautiful, perfectly blank face like hers. Once she found whatever it was she was looking for in Taichi’s eyes, she opened her mouth to speak.

“...But first, I think I’ll start us off with a joke!”

“.....What?”

Give me a break!

“Well, we started with a joke last time, remember? Last time we had one of these deep conversations, just the two of us? Oh, but technically I was [Aoki] that time... Well, anyway, I just think it’s a good idea to keep with tradition!”

“No thank you! No joking necessary! Why is it that whenever we have a serious moment together, you always feel the need to ruin it?!”

Why couldn’t she just take this seriously?

“And yet, for some reason, in times like these... I can never think of a good one, you know?!”

“Then don’t bother!”

“And there you have it! That was my ‘tries to tell a joke but can’t think of one’ joke. Whaddya think?”

“What do you mean, what do I think?! You can keep your ‘tries to tell a joke but can’t think of one’ jokes! I didn’t want you to tell a joke in the first place!”

“Okay, whatever. I know you didn’t *want* the joke. I just want to make sure

you understand that I could, in fact, think of a few other jokes, but instead purposely chose this ‘tries to tell a joke but can’t think of one’ joke as my joke!”

“Yes, I get it! Out of all your other jokes, you purposely chose the ‘tries to tell a joke but can’t think of one’ joke as your joke! Okay?!”

“Actually, my ‘tries to tell a joke but can’t think of one’ joke wasn’t just a one-off joke but in fact all part of an elaborate scheme to manipulate you into saying the word ‘joke’ with me a bunch of times as a callback to the ‘bleep’ joke! ...Oh god, I said it so many times, the word ‘joke’ doesn’t feel real anymore...”

“I had a feeling that’s what you were going for, damn it!”

“You’re actually really good at playing along, you know that?”

“I’m not doing it on purpose! It just kinda happens whenever I’m around you!”

Why were they sitting here, goofing off in a random parking lot?

“Anyway, back on topic.” Nagase’s smile suddenly vanished, replaced by an empty stare. “I have five dads, see. Oh, but technically only three of them were ever made ‘official,’ I guess. Anyway.”

Out of nowhere, Taichi found himself face-to-face with Nagase’s darkness—and he wasn’t ready for it.

“Wait, so... your mom got divorced and remarried a bunch of times?”

“Yup! It’s no big deal, though. They each had their own oddities, but none of them were actually bad people. Some of them tried to bond with their new stepdaughter... some of them wished I didn’t exist... and some of them had kids of their own. But no matter what, I always did my best to get along with them.”

Taichi had no personal experience to speak from, so he couldn’t say for sure... but it sounded like hell on earth to suddenly have to treat four strangers and however many of their children as “family.”

“Obviously it wasn’t very hard. All I had to do to make it work was change myself.”

“What do you mean, you changed yourself...?”

Nagase stared down at the concrete parking bumpers. “My second dad—that is, my first stepdad—had some... issues. I was in first or second grade back then, and... well, to put it simply, he was the violent type. Oh, but that’s not the root of my trauma or whatever. To be honest, I don’t really have any ‘scars’ in that sense. So you can’t actually ‘fix’ me like Inaban said,” she added. “Sure, he was violent, but it wasn’t enough to get Child Protective Services involved or anything. I made sure of that... or rather, I made sure it wouldn’t come to that, I guess you could say.”

Taichi could only sit there in silence and listen.

“I just played the part of myself... adjusted to suit the other person’s tastes.” In spite of her flawless natural beauty, her smile was equal parts serene and... empty. “It sounds a lot cooler than it is. I didn’t consciously *decide* to start acting. I just noticed that if I did this or said that, I didn’t get in trouble as much. So from there, I just... kept saying or doing those things! And for better or for worse, I was apparently pretty good at it. Sometimes, if I did or said the ‘right’ things, not only would I not get in trouble, I’d even get rewarded! So I just kept on doing it. I changed all my personal preferences to suit them. And then I changed the rest of myself to match.”

So in other words, she’d been playing kiss-up—something pretty much any human being had done at some point in their lives—just cranked up to an extreme degree.

“Then, after a while, they got divorced, and pretty soon after that we ended up with my next new stepdad. He wasn’t a bad guy or anything—he was actually really cool. I knew I didn’t need to do it again, but... I guess when you’re a kid, you feel obligated to impress, you know? So there I was, ‘performing’ his preferred version of myself.” She laughed and shook her head at herself. “From there, I just couldn’t stop. I started to create all these customized versions of myself for each person I knew... The years flew by, and then in my third year of middle school—last spring—my fifth dad... He got real sick and passed away. He never talked much, but he was really smart. I think he probably knew I was putting on an act. His last words to me were, ‘Choose your own path.’ ” Her clear voice shook with emotion as she recalled the memory. “I got the sense my mom really loved him. I don’t know the details, but after he died, she said to

me, 'I'm sorry for everything I've put you through all this time. From now on, I'm going to work hard to give you the kind of life you want.' She was sobbing... And from then on, we've been living together just the two of us. It's nothing special, but... In the end, my rollercoaster life got its happy ending. See? No scars, no trauma."

Nagase tilted her head and smiled at Taichi. Her hair glittered gold beneath the setting sun, silky strands dancing on the breeze.

"But that's where the world's worst epilogue starts."

Once again, her expression cleared of any emotion, leaving behind only a flawless blank canvas.

"They told me to choose my own path. Live the kind of life I want. So I decided I'd give it a shot. But then it hit me. What *do* I want? What *is* my path? What does the real me even look like? I kept asking myself all these stupid questions, because, as it turned out... after nearly ten years of living as everyone else's version of myself, I couldn't remember my own."

She had spent the formative years of her childhood adapting herself to suit everyone around her, and apparently this was the result.

"After that... Man, it's been hard, you know? I keep trying to 'be myself' and 'follow my heart' or whatever, but I don't actually know how! I'm just... at a total loss. So these days I've decided to just put on whatever persona fits in a given moment. And that's what I've been doing so far."

Hold on, Taichi thought. Is that why you made someone else choose your club for you? You weren't just indecisive... You literally couldn't choose?

He thought back on all the time they'd spent together in the club. All that time, she wasn't being herself—just some false persona she invented? Her "colorful personality" was actually just a series of different characters she pulled out of a hat at random?

"For the longest time, my one defining trait—the one thing I could safely attribute to the 'real' me—has been my ability to read people and figure out what they want. Ironical that my last bastion of identity is the exact reason I ended up in this mess in the first place... But now I'm not so sure anymore,

actually. With everyone pushing me to just ‘be myself’... I’m starting to think... maybe... I can’t actually... read people anymore.”

Taichi remembered how horrified Nagase was that she hadn’t noticed Kiriya’s androphobia.

“I got so scared... Without that one thing, I would lose every last shred of the real me! Then how would I be able to interact with the rest of you...? How would I know... which persona to put on...? And lately it’s like... I’m starting to lose control of... which ‘me’ I am... at any given time...”

He remembered Inaba’s words: that Nagase was the most at risk. The most likely victim.

“Then the body-swapping started... My concept of the ‘real me’ was almost completely gone, but I managed to keep ‘Nagase Iori’ intact. It was easy—anyone who saw [my face] instantly thought of me as Nagase Iori! It didn’t matter what was going on internally, as long as I had my [physical form]! But then, with the body-swap, *that* got all jumbled, too... I lost the ‘inner me’... I lost the [physical me]... and with the way things are going, no one will be able to tell it’s me, not even myself... and then... eventually I think I’m just going to disappear completely!”

She had put up so many walls, her entire world was now nothing but walls. And right when it was falling apart, here came a giant earthquake in the form of the body-swap, threatening to bring it all crashing down for good. For the longest time she was hanging by a thread from the edge of a cliff, and now she had fallen into the depths of a bottomless ravine, consumed by darkness, drowning...

Taichi wanted to rescue her, to plunge headfirst into the darkness to save her—but he couldn’t. Not because he was afraid, but because he knew doing so wouldn’t actually help her.

Think!

What could he do for her?

“You’re not going to disappear. Not now, not ever,” Taichi said firmly, and Nagase shot him a questioning look. “No matter what happens, in the end, I’ll

always know it's you."

She was drowning, and he couldn't even toss her a lifesaver—but he could at least shine a ray of hope down there.

Nagase stared at him for a long moment, and then— "That's... not possible..."

"Sure it is," he said, looking into her eyes.

"How can you be so sure...?" she asked timidly—fearfully—hopefully.

"Because I—"

Just then, Inaba's voice echoed in his mind.

—*Goddamn martyr.*

The words weighed on him like a ton of bricks.

What was he saying? And why was he saying it?

If this was just about helping Nagase, then was he just saying it to give her hope? Or was there more to it than that?

He wasn't sure—and he knew that meant he had no right to say it in the first place.

So he changed tack at the last minute.

"I mean, uh... I just can, okay? Trust me. You'll be fine!"

He sounded so ridiculous. How could he begin to "fix" Nagase when he wasn't even confident in himself?

He glanced away. Her clear skin and sparkling eyes were too radiant for him to take.

"Hmmm... If you say so... I *gueueess* I'll trust you..."

Nagase's voice was colored with a hint of joy... and an ounce of sadness.

Chapter 8: Born That Way

“Morning, Taichi.”

Taichi’s next encounter with Nagase the following Monday proved to be about as awkward as he expected.

“...Morning, Nagase.”

There was an uncomfortable pause.

Then she clapped her hands to either side of her smooth face like she was revving herself up for something.

“You promised me somethin’, man to man! Promised you’d keep on treatin’ me the same as always, no matter what! Ain’t that right, my guy?!”

“What kind of weird stage persona is this supposed to be?” Taichi retorted.

“You promised me somethin’, man to man! Promised you’d keep on treatin’ me the same as always, no matter what! Ain’t that right, my guy?!”

“You don’t have to repeat yourself! And you’re not a man!” He paused. “Wait, were you just trying to get me to say that?!”

Nagase chuckled, though that wasn’t a confirmation either way. “I wonder why promises sound so much more passionate when you add the ‘man to man’ part... ‘Woman to woman’ or ‘woman to man’ just doesn’t have the same ring to it...”

“Beats me... Anyway, are you doing okay?” It was a bit random, but he’d suddenly felt the impulse to ask.

“...Yeah, totally!” She smiled and made a peace sign with her hand... but was it safe to take her word at face value?

“Well, if there’s anything I can do for you, just let me know.” It was all he knew how to say.

“Will do. Thanks... You’re a nice guy,” Nagase muttered, staring at the floor in

an uncharacteristically shy display. Then her expression hardened. “But... I think there’s someone else who needs your concern more than me.”

Taichi followed her melancholy gaze to the door to find that one rather exhausted-looking Inaba Himeko had just arrived.



Inaba’s health didn’t seem to have improved over the weekend. If anything, she appeared to be getting worse. As worried as Taichi was about Nagase, he was just as worried for Inaba, too—especially with her complexion growing more and more pale by the day.

But without any meaningful way to help her, the days simply slipped by... until Friday, during fourth period history class.

After the usual brief lapse into darkness—the word “usual” having become unfortunately applicable these days—Taichi was suddenly hit with an intense wave of nausea.

“Hgghh?!”

He quickly clapped a hand over his mouth to try to keep it down. Then, without even checking to see [who] he was, he jumped to his feet and bolted from the classroom. He could hear the puzzled murmurs of his classmates, but he didn’t have the mental bandwidth to care at the moment. He needed a toilet.

Checking his legs, he could see that he was wearing black knee-high socks and a skirt.

And so into the girls’ restroom he went.

He dashed into the closest stall and emptied the contents of [her] mouth. Another wave rose up in [her] throat, and he heaved that up as well. The back of [her] throat burned from the stomach acid, and it was so unpleasant he half-wished he could tear out [her] esophagus altogether. On top of everything else, he had a throbbing migraine, too.

Then someone else dashed in.

“Inaban?! You okay?!”

It was Nagase. Evidently he was in [Inaba's body].

"That you in there, Taichi? Good grief..." Next he heard [his own voice], tinged with annoyance—undoubtedly Inaba herself. "Surely you could've tried to hold out a little longer than *that*! What a wuss..."

"Hey, guys... Yeah, it's me... Not sure how you expected me to withstand that, honestly..." [Inaba] (Taichi) groaned as he shambled over to the sink to splash water on [her] face.

At that point, their teacher rushed in to check on them, and [Taichi] (Inaba) explained that [Inaba] hadn't been feeling well that day, and that [he] would make sure to take [her] down to the infirmary. Their teacher was evidently eager to get back to class, as he promptly took [Taichi's] word at face value and left without even checking on Inaba himself.

"Iori, you should go back to class, too. I'll handle [this]."

"I told you, you need to take better care of yourself, Inaban... You're really starting to worry me, you know..." Nagase muttered. Then she turned to [Inaba] (Taichi). "You feeling okay, Taichi?"

"...Yeah. I feel a lot better after getting it out of my system... I could probably go back to class, even."

"Taichi! Don't forget you're borrowing [Inaba's body] right now!" she scolded, a finger pointed firmly in his direction.

"...Oh, right. Sorry. I should be more careful with [other people's bodies]..." He felt guilty for his total lack of consideration.

"But not your own?" [Taichi] (Inaba) shot back pointedly.

"I'm not sure I wanna leave you two to deal with this on your own... Especially since neither of you ever stop to worry about yourselves... Either you go rest in the infirmary, or you leave school early and rest at home! You got that?"

After a stern, motherly scolding, Nagase finally headed back to class.

"Why does she keep going on and on about that? Doesn't she trust us?" [Inaba] (Taichi) muttered.

"I know, right? Sheesh," [Taichi] (Inaba) answered. "Anyway, let's go to the

clubroom.”

“...I’m detecting a hint of irony here...”

And so they headed to the clubroom.

Right as they arrived, however, Taichi and Inaba reverted to their original bodies.

“Ah... We’re back...” Taichi muttered to himself.

“Yep...” Inaba replied.

“What now? Wanna just go to the infirmary? Though, I guess it’s possible there might be another body-swap...”

Inaba had chosen the clubroom over the infirmary because, according to her, she was uncomfortable leaving someone in [her ailing body] without her direct supervision.

“There’s just no telling what might happen there... Anyway, it’s no big deal. If I have to sleep, I can just do it here.” With that, she lowered herself onto the clubroom couch, using the armrest as a pillow. The couch didn’t offer much room to stretch out, but it was functional, at least. “Ugh... Sorry to put you through that, Taichi. You can go back to class now.”

“Gee, that sounds like a great idea! *Please*. I’m not gonna just leave you like this. I know you got all the nausea out of your system, but you’re dead tired and you have a headache.”

“That’s not what you told Iori. And save the sarcasm, you dick.”

“Don’t call me a dick. Focus on getting better.”

There was a slight pause.

“I’m just a burden right now, aren’t I...? I’m sorry...” Inaba whispered faintly, staring up at the ceiling. There was a hint of emotion in her voice.

“No, you’re not a burden... but I know you know how serious this is. As it stands, we’re just a single badly-timed body-swap away from another incident like we had today. But this isn’t about the body-swap. This is about your health,

plain and simple.”

“Yeah...” Inaba replied vaguely, resting her arm over her eyes.

For once, this actually pissed him off.

“Look, Inaba. You need to get your shit together, okay? Something’s clearly up with you lately. First you pass out, and now this? All you ever say is ‘I’m fine, don’t worry,’ but everybody knows it’s bull. We’ve literally *been* [you], remember? You always used to be super healthy, but then the body-swap happened, and now look at you! Obviously we’re gonna worry about you! Would it really kill you to tell us what’s going on? At least then maybe we could help you!” He exhaled. “If I’m wrong, and this is just some unrelated disease, then please just say so. I won’t even ask you to go into detail about it.”

He knew he probably wasn’t in any position to get on this soapbox—at least, not in Inaba’s eyes—but he just couldn’t let this slide any longer.

“God, will you quit freaking out already? You’re making my head hurt.”

There she goes, dodging the question again!

“Inaba... I want to *help* you, okay?!”

Perhaps his sincerity had finally gotten through to her. She sat upright, her posture as flawless as ever despite her current condition. Then she looked up at him.

“Why, exactly, do you want to help me? And don’t you give me any of that ‘because I want to’ or ‘because we’re friends’ crap.”

“Uh...” He fell silent—she’d beaten him to the punch—before promptly finding a different answer. “Well, you’re always looking out for us, you know? Your actions might not always make sense to us, but you always lend a hand when we need it most. And now I want to repay the favor.”

He looked down on her with a grin, daring her to find fault with his reasoning.

But Inaba simply snorted.

“Spare me the melodrama already... So if I *didn’t* look out for you, you wouldn’t help me?”

“Well, no, I’d still help you either way... C’mon, don’t be mean.”

“I’m not being mean,” she responded flatly, and Taichi had no response.

“Nnggh...”

Unless a groan counted as a response, anyway.

“I gotta say, I don’t get why you people care so much. Why are you all such good people? Makes no sense to me... Maybe if you’d all try being a bit more evil, things would be different... No, that’s not right. I’m probably the one who needs to change.”

Taichi had a feeling there was something more hidden behind this casual commentary.

Then it hit him: hadn’t Inaba let her guard down like this multiple times in the past?

All this time, she’d done nothing but expound on the dangers of the body-swap, and Taichi—no, all four of them—had assumed it was just a warning and nothing more.

After all, they knew what she was like. She was hyper-competent, and so she had very little to worry about when it came to herself. Hence, she spent all her time criticizing the others, helping them improve— But what if they were all unconsciously laboring under a giant misconception about her?

He slowly worked up the nerve to speak, knowing his voice would shake as he asked...

“Inaba... are you... doing okay?”

“In what sense? Physically? I’ll be fine after a little rest.”

“No, not physically... I mean, are you doing okay with the body-swap?”

He could tell he probably had a weepy, pained look on his face.

But Inaba smiled—softly, sweetly, warmly, gently, serenely.

She wasn’t the type to try to hide her emotions, but she tended to give off the impression that she kept everything behind a steely façade. Normally any emotional outbursts were performative at best—and yet here she was now, her

protective walls gone, her vulnerabilities exposed; and Taichi knew he needed to pay close attention.

Then she spoke.

“No. I’m not okay.”

I knew it.

Granted, Inaba’s “warnings” were almost certainly intended for their benefit to some degree... but for the most part, she was probably just venting. Anxiety came with the territory of being smart... Maybe she’d just wanted to get it off her chest.

In the past, she referred to the body-swap as “hopeless”... Didn’t that imply, then, that she herself felt hopeless?

And yet he’d completely failed to realize it. Instead, he deluded himself into thinking she was too strong to get hurt—right up until she fell apart.

She was right. He really was a stupid goddamn martyr.

The body-swap was to blame for her condition—but so were they for failing to notice.

She was the smartest person in the club, and because of that, no one tried to read any deeper.

Just then, her eyes widened. “Wait... No, that’s not right... Forget I said that.”

Which part of it “wasn’t right,” exactly?

“I mean, uh... By ‘not okay,’ I just mean in general. No one in their right mind would be ‘okay’ with switching bodies all the time. I’m not saying there’s... anything wrong with me specifically.”

Her desperate excuse only served to confirm just how awfully he’d been treating her all this time.

“The biggest victim of the body-swap... It’s you, isn’t it?”

Some “friend” he turned out to be.

The strength drained from his legs, and he collapsed to his knees on the spot.

“Did you switch bodies again? ...No, doesn’t seem like it... Great. Just great. Ugh, I’m off my game today... I let my guard down in front of the worst possible enemy...” Inaba bit her thumbnail in frustration.

“That’s what I am to you? An enemy...?”

“No... That’s not what I meant. You...” Inaba fell silent and glanced around the room, visibly hesitant. She was always so forthright—except when it came to her own emotions. “...You guys mean the world to me. You’re my best friends... which is why you’re also my worst enemies.”

It was quite possibly the first time she’d ever opened up about something so deeply personal. But what was the significance behind the word “enemy”?

“What do you—?”

“This conversation ends here.”

With that, the door to her heart slammed firmly shut once more.

“What, after all that? You can’t just leave me hanging, Inaba. If you really see us as your friends—even a dumbass like me—then let us shoulder some of the pain. I can’t bear to see you suffering like this.”

“Then don’t look.”

“That’s not the point and you know it!”

Did she seriously intend to bear this burden all on her own? She should’ve known he would never let her do that.

Turning a blind eye, running away, making excuses—what was the point? It didn’t change anything. The pain was still there. So the only option was to accept it, reflect on it, and move past it.

That was all there was to it.

Taichi pushed himself to his feet.

“What kind of friends are we, if you can’t tell me why you’re hurting?”

Her expression crumpled like she was on the verge of tears. “But... the moment I tell you, our friendship is over—!”

“No matter what it is, I guarantee you, our friendship is strong enough to handle it. Don’t underestimate me, Inaba.”

Times like these, he was reminded that she was an ordinary teen girl like any other. For as strong as she was, she had her weaknesses, too.

“How am I supposed to believe that...? I’m not like you people... I’m fucked up beyond repair!”

She was shaking now; her pale, slender fingers dug into the leather of the sofa so tightly, Taichi thought they might break.

Am I sure I want to do this?

Maybe it wasn’t the right thing to do... but he needed to do it. He needed to understand, or else he couldn’t help her. He wanted to take that first step, even if it meant he’d get hurt in the process.

“It’ll be fine, Inaba. I promise. I’m going to fix you,” he declared without an ounce of hesitation.

Honestly, he was probably an idiot for making a promise he wasn’t sure he could keep. But something told him he needed to say it in order to get to the heart of the matter.

Inaba looked at him and balled her hands into fists. She twisted around and punched the wall as hard as she could—hard enough to hurt herself. “How the *fuck* can you say that?! You don’t even have the first clue what it is! God, I can’t fucking understand you... Fine, whatever. I’ll just lay it all out on the table.” She glared up at him sharply, almost hatefully.

It’ll be fine, Taichi told himself.

“The truth is... I... I can’t trust any of you.”

That was... not what he’d been expecting.

Meanwhile, her voice took on a hostile edge. “When you switch bodies with someone, you don’t just get their [body]—you get their whole [identity]. You know what that means?”

Taichi felt himself starting to lose his nerve.

“It means you can do whatever you want—commit any crime you like—and the fault will stay with that [identity]. You can kill or steal or rape... and at the end of the day, you walk away scot-free.”

“But that would be a totally messed-up thing to do—”

“And? Who gives a shit about anyone else?” Inaba interjected coldly. “Maybe my examples were a little extreme. Nonetheless, any time you switch bodies with someone, you could easily search their house, dig up secrets, swipe pocket money, crap like that. Right?”

“Well... yeah, but...”

“So I keep worrying you guys are going to do that shit. Whenever one of you is in [my body], I can’t stop obsessing over what you people might do with it. I’m so scared, I can’t even sleep at night.” The dark circles under her eyes seemed more pronounced than ever. “But more than that, I hate myself for thinking it. I wish I was dead.” She paused. “I consider you all to be my friends... and I understand you guys would never do anything like that. Really. I know I probably sound like I’m contradicting myself, but I need you to believe that.” Pause. “But... that doesn’t stop me being scared. I know it’s stupid, but my brain goes crazy thinking up all these terrifying what-if scenarios. Whenever we switch back, I can’t stop myself from double-checking to make sure everything’s just the way I left it. And... I’m terrified you guys will discover just how fucked-up I really am inside.” Her monologue continued as though the dam inside her had finally burst. “All this time, I thought everyone was like that. No matter how much somebody claims to trust everyone, I figured they had to be at least a *little* suspicious of each other, deep down. But once the body-swap started, I realized... you guys really do all trust each other, even me. None of you were even remotely scared... So what kind of awful bitch did that make me?”

She wasn’t *choosing* not to trust them—she was literally incapable of it. She knew they trusted her, and as much as she wanted to return the favor, she couldn’t. Taichi could only imagine the pain she must have felt.

“Look, Inaba... No one’s going to hate you for it. I can promise you that.”

No matter how she felt towards them on the inside, she was still their friend.

“Okay, maybe you won’t suddenly decide you hate me... but now that you

know, can you really guarantee it won't change anything?"

"Well..."

"Because I can't. Now that I've told someone I care about that I don't return their trust... I can't just pretend nothing happened. I'm not that callous."

No matter how Taichi and the others felt, it didn't change how Inaba herself felt about it.

Inaba took a breath and put a hand to her chest. Evidently her next words required a bit more courage.



“I don’t trust a single person on this planet, not even my own family. To me they’re all enemies. And out of everyone, my biggest enemies are you four, because... assuming I’m not just full of myself... you guys trust me more than anyone else does. I just... It would be so much easier if I could just be a total misanthrope, you know? But even with my trust issues, I still can’t bring myself to hate people... I still want to have friends... So I’m just caught in the middle, and every day is fucking *suffering*...!” She let out a dry laugh, scoffing at herself. “There... I said it.”

“Well, in that case—” Taichi began, but stopped short.

As he searched for his next words, Inaba curled her lip in a bitter smirk. “Just warning you now, you can keep searching all you like, but there’s no way to ‘fix’ me. I was just... born this way.” Now that the floodgates had opened, Inaba continued her tirade tirelessly. “I don’t have some traumatic past like Yui or Iori. In fiction you always get these characters who end up with twisted personalities due to some tragic backstory, and the audience tends to feel sorry for them or whatever. But that’s not so bad, really. At least then they have a *reason* they turned out that way, you know? That way they’re a tiny bit redeemable. All they need to unfuck themselves is for someone to come along and heal their scars! But what about someone who never *had* a tragic backstory? They were just... born defective. And there’s no fixing it. Once you’re born a certain way, changing it means changing who you are as a person... and if that isn’t pitiful, I don’t know what is.” She waved a hand in deprecation. “Not that I think I’m some tragic heroine or something... Anyway, the rest of this is just my own personal opinion, but I think for most people, emotional trauma in real life doesn’t have a single concrete cause like you see in fiction. Of course, I’m not trying to claim there was some mysterious external factor that caused me to turn out the way I did. But for most people, there’s no big life-shattering event. They’re just born with certain traits that lead one way or another. In fiction there’s always an underlying problem that needs to be solved, because that’s just how storytelling works. But if you ask me, in the real world, most ‘problems’ don’t *have* solutions. No story, no resolution... And in that sense, maybe there’s no ‘fixing’ your martyrdom, either. I mean, you were just born that way, right?”

Going by her logic, that would certainly be the case. Nine times out of ten, there would simply be no “fixing” a person.

“Yeah... You might be right. Maybe there’s just no fixing someone who was never traumatized to begin with,” Taichi answered.

He didn’t think she was wrong, *per se*—but he didn’t believe that she was right, either. At least, he didn’t *want* to believe it. He didn’t want to live in a world that hopeless.

Then something occurred to him—something that would possibly anger her. But Taichi decided to press forward regardless. No matter what happened, he refused to sidestep the issue. They needed to move past it.

Inaba had been so desperate to keep it hidden that she’d pushed herself to the point of collapse... and now he had made her reveal it all. Thus, it was his burden to bear.

“But maybe you’re fine just the way you are.”

As it turned out, he truly was optimistic to a fault.

“Excuse me?” Inaba narrowed her eyes at him dubiously.

“Well, if it’s just how you were born, then it’s probably no big deal, right? That’s what I think, anyway.”

God must have given them those traits for a reason, or so Taichi surmised.

For a while she struggled to process his statement—until after a while, just as expected, she began to shake with silent fury. Without a doubt, he’d really kicked the hornet’s nest with this one.

“Oh, I see... So you think I’ve just been obsessing over nothing, is that it? You think I’m stupid for worrying myself sick?”

For the first time in his life, Taichi discovered what it felt like to provoke someone’s murderous rage.

“I... I never said anything like that!” For a moment, he contemplated dropping the issue... but sooner or later they needed to confront it. No pain, no gain. That was just how the world worked. “But, yeah, I guess ultimately that’s what I’m getting at.”

“TAICHI!” Inaba jumped to her feet, stormed over, and seized him by the collar. Anger burned in her large, almond-shaped eyes, scarcely hidden by her long lashes. Her lips were still pale, but her cheeks were flushed—and paired with her natural beauty, her livid expression served well to conceal any lingering traces of poor health.

All this time, he’d assumed she was just as tough on the inside as she looked to be on the outside... but now he knew better. Inaba was no stronger than any of them.

Her grip was making it a little hard to breathe, but Taichi continued regardless. “I meant... maybe... that applies to you, too.”

Her eyes widened in shock.

“I mean, don’t get me wrong... It sucks that you don’t trust us, but I don’t think you need to force yourself to change. We’ll accept you just the way you are... even if things don’t stay exactly the way they were before.”

He felt her grip tighten.

“If I were you, I’d *never* accept someone as fucked-up as me!” Her face was a breath away from his, twisted with misery.

At this point, he knew he had to be blunt.

“Well, too bad. I already have.”

All at once, the strength drained from her fingers. “What are you even talking about...?”

“Like I said, I’ve already accepted you for who you are... and I’m sure Nagase and Kiriya and Aoki will do the same. You should just tell them, Inaba. You’ll feel better getting it off your chest. Plus, once it’s out in the open, you can just focus on preventive measures. Problem solved.”

“Wh... Are you *braindead*?! There’s no way it’ll go over that easily!” she shrieked. Evidently her bafflement was starting to win out over her anger.

“There’s no guarantee it won’t, though.”

“Give me a break! I can’t just *tell them*! It’s too risky! What if they turn against me?! What am I supposed to do then?!”

Truth be told, if that were the case, there wouldn't be much they could do about it. But for once, Inaba was seeking someone else's advice—looking for help instead of handling everything herself. Surely there had to be something he could do for her... and yet Taichi couldn't think of the perfect solution.

"Even if they do, you'll still have me. Does that work for you?"

"Wha...?!" Speechless, Inaba staggered back a step... then another... and stared at him like he'd grown a second head. "Do... Do you even hear yourself when you say this tripe...?! God, you're so naive...!"

Surely it's not THAT big of a deal, Taichi thought to himself. "Anyway, the first step is for you to accept yourself for who you are, Inaba. I can't help you there."

That was the starting point—even if "who she was" would end up changing later on.

"I can't believe I'm letting you lecture me..." With a few more steps backwards, she bumped into the couch, and collapsed onto it as though her legs had given out. She flopped down sideways, curled up in a ball, and buried her face in her arms. It was the first time Taichi had ever seen her so blatantly vulnerable.

He decided to give her some time, so he took a seat in the nearest folding chair.

It looked like they would end up skipping fourth period entirely.

Here they were, just the two of them, while all the other hundreds of students were off in class. It was peaceful in a way he couldn't quite understand or explain... but he hoped Inaba felt the same.

Suddenly, Inaba shot upright. "Nope! I can't do it!"

"Can't do what?"

"I can't show the others how fucked up I am. No matter how hard I try, I can only see things going badly..." She hung her head, covering her face with her hands. The usual arrogant, headstrong Inaba was nowhere to be found.

"But it worked out fine with me—"

"Look, you're not like most people, okay?"

...Is she trying to say I'm weird?

After a moment, something else occurred to him.

"Listen, Inaba. I think when people force themselves to try and keep a secret hidden from the whole world, sometimes it can make that secret seem way bigger than it actually is."

"You're just saying that—"

"So, I've decided I'm going to share with you a secret that I was planning to take to my grave."

"*What?*" Inaba stared at him in shock for the umpteenth time that day.

"Seriously, it's bad. Real bad. If this gets out, I'm dead. I'll have to quit school—quit society—quit life! Or at least... that's how I feel, anyway." This was his big idea in the first place, and yet already his voice was starting to shake. Was he sure he wanted to go down this road? If he screwed this up, the outcome would be no laughing matter... He was starting to lose his nerve.

"And what would I stand to gain from you doing this? Don't tell me you're aiming for some kind of 'you spill yours, I spill mine' thing..."

"That's exactly what I'm aiming for, actually."

Her face twitching, Inaba stood up, silently walked forward— "Hyah!"
—and shoved the table right into his gut.

"Guh!"

What was that for?!

"WHAT KINDA SHIT-FOR-BRAINS ARE YOU?!"

For a moment, her scream made him freeze up.

"K-Keep your voice down, Inaba! I know we're in the Rec Hall, but people are technically in class right now—"

BAM! Inaba slammed her fist on the table. "Goddamn it... Every little thing is pissing me the fuck off...! I've been stressed out for a while now, but this? This is the final straw." Her eyes shone with a sadistic glint. "Now let's hear this little secret of yours, shall we...?!"

Her lips curled in a wicked grin. Now *that* was the Inaba they all knew and loved.

Granted, a tiny part of him was starting to think maybe he would have been better off with the other, less dangerous Inaba... but he ignored it.

“Okay, but... you have to promise that you’ll tell everyone the truth—”

“*You first*. Then I’ll decide from there. After all, what I told you was technically a secret, so this way we’ll be even.”

Taichi swallowed hard. Truth be told, he was sincerely terrified to admit it—especially to a girl. But as much as he wanted to run from this, he knew he had to move forward.

Screw it.

“Okay... Here I go...”

This was the most nervous he’d ever been in all his life. His whole body was numb, and he felt kind of queasy. Inaba seemed to sense his apprehension; she tensed up like she was bracing herself for it.

And so Taichi resigned himself to his fate.

“I’ve... touched myself thinking about you before.”

Time came to a stop.

The room froze like it was the South Pole.

He didn’t move a muscle, afraid of melting the ice and opening the floodgates. He wanted to delay her reaction for as long as possible.

But unfortunately, time hadn’t actually stopped.

“Touched yourself, as in... *that* kind of touching yourself...?” she asked.

“.....Yeah. *That* kind of touching myself.”

“Ah... I see... And you were thinking about me at the time... Which means you’ve probably thought about Iori and Yui that way too, right...?”

Despair sank in. He had no choice but to nod.

“I see... So you jerk off to girls you know in real life...”

There was something terrifying about the way she calmly laid it all out, point by point.

“...You thought about me when you were... Pffft! Keheheh... GahaHAAAhahaha!” She clutched her stomach as she cackled. Gasping for breath, she collapsed back on the couch and slapped the leather in her mirth.

“Wh—Look, I don’t do it all the time, okay?! Just like once or twice in the past! Are you listening to me?!” Even without a mirror, he could tell that his face was bright red.

“Aaiihahahah! Aaah... *My sides*... Keheheh...” Tears flowed from her eyes by the time her laughter finally subsided, and she was wheezing like she’d just run an entire marathon. She would pause to wipe her eyes, take a deep breath... and then burst out laughing all over again at the memory of it.

Then, finally, once she was calm, she let out a heavy sigh—and the next instant, she shot Taichi a half-lidded glare so cold it was practically spine-chilling.

“YOU *PERVERT*!” Her voice was dripping with contempt and revulsion. “Sicko! Horndog! Creep! Degenerate! Lowlife! Freak! Dirty mongrel! Pig!”

Each word cut him to pieces. He started to wonder whether someone could die from verbal assault.

“Nngghh...” He couldn’t even formulate words anymore. His life was over... This was all a huge mistake...

“But...” Finally, Inaba’s glare softened. “Maybe you’re fine just the way you are, too.” She grinned. “I gotta say, I wasn’t expecting that kind of thing from *you*, Taichi... Do all guys get like this when they hit puberty? Still, it was pretty ballsy of you... One wrong move and you would’ve been dead meat... You’re lucky I happen to have a high tolerance for this sort of thing. But don’t you dare breathe a word of that to the other girls, you hear me? Good lord.”

“I told you it was really bad! I could never admit this sort of thing to anyone but you!”

“Just me, huh... Should I be flattered...? God, this is all so stupid! You’re stupid for admitting to that crap! For thinking it would convince me! For thinking I’d be

cool with it! And I'm stupid for... actually being cool with it... but most of all, I'm stupid for finding it genuinely touching...!" She looked up at the ceiling and pinched her tear ducts, trying her hardest not to cry. But evidently she was too late; she hastily rubbed her eyes with her sleeve. "It... It's not what you think! These are just... leftover tears from all that laughing! Got it?!"

Act your age, Taichi thought. But then he realized that she *was*.

Ultimately, they were all just kids—full of worries, full of pain. And they couldn't carry it alone; they needed someone to help shoulder the burden from time to time... though maybe that was less of a "kid" thing and more of a "human" thing.

"You know, I'm surprised you don't have your own handkerchief. Thought all the girls had one," Taichi mused as he approached her to hand her his.

"Goddamnit... What the hell is your problem?! You and your stupid half-wit antics... Are you trying to make *me* fall for you, too...?"

While admittedly they were in no real rush, they decided it would be better to just get the whole thing over with as soon as possible—and so they summoned the rest of the CRC for a club meeting.

The battle was to take place at lunch in the clubroom. In the meantime, a very red-faced Inaba had tasked Taichi with the duty of promptly forgetting "all that crying and stupid shit I said," or else she would "fucking *crucify*" him.

And so the bell rang, signaling the end of fourth period and the start of lunch break...

"...And that's about the gist of it."

Inaba wasted no time in dumping her entire angst-ridden spiel onto Nagase, Kiriya, and Aoki. Up until now she'd been so reluctant to admit any of it, but once she made up her mind about something, she was fully committed to seeing it through. That was just the sort of person she was.

That said, her fear hadn't gone anywhere, and her knees shook the whole time she stood before them.

As for Taichi, he was fine with it, and he'd told her as much. He was confident the other three would accept her regardless. Now all he could do was watch and pray. If somehow things didn't work out as expected... and her biggest fear came to pass... would she ever forgive him? Worse still, what would happen to the Cultural Research Club itself?

But knowing the three of them, that would never happen.

None of them said a word (because Inaba had demanded they shut up and listen). Then, finally, Nagase was the first to break the silence. "Okay, wait... So basically..."

She paused for a moment. Inaba stiffened. How would Nagase respond to this confession?

"...you have anxiety?"

That... was nowhere near the sort of reaction Taichi had been expecting.

"Wh... *Anxiety*? Iori, were you even listening to me? That's a gross oversimplification of the issue here...!" Inaba stammered, baffled.

To Nagase Iori, Inaba Himeko's trust issues were merely a bad case of anxiety.

Then Kiriya spoke. "Honestly, I can totally relate. Whenever I finish a swap with Aoki, I like always check [my body]. And then I make sure none of my stuff is missing."

"Wow! That actually *really* hurts my feelings! Why me, specifically?! What about Taichi?!" Aoki wailed.

"Shut up! That's what you get for acting like such a creep all the time!" Kiriya shot back, crushing him instantly.

"Uh, hello...? Don't you people have anything else to say about it?" Inaba cut in.

"Hmm... Well, you're definitely overreacting about the crimes thing. But don't worry! I have the good sense not to do anything like that. I don't even jaywalk, hardly!" Kiriya proudly thrust out her chest.

As it turned out, Kiriya had had similar worries (though the severity and subject of said worries were slightly different)—and thus she accepted it

without hesitation.

“Okay, listen. Your whole trust issues thing... That applies to everyone, right?! Not just me?!” Aoki asked desperately.

“Does it even matter...?” Inaba muttered.

“Of course it matters! It’s the most important part! I couldn’t care less ‘bout the rest!” Evidently Aoki was totally cool with it to the point that he didn’t even care.

And that was the extent of their commentary.

“For the time being, Inaban,” Nagase spoke, her tone unusually firm, “I’d say your first priority should be...” She waited until she had everyone’s attention. “...to dash down to the classroom and get your lunch!” She held up a red and white checkered lunch bag at eye level and gave it a little shake, all the while keeping her expression dead serious.

“Definitely,” Kiriya agreed.

“Totally,” Aoki nodded.

“Well, that’s that decided! Go grab it! You too, Taichi. I’m starving!” With that, Nagase pushed the two of them out of the clubroom. Meanwhile, she whispered something into Inaba’s ear, though he didn’t catch what she said.

For a while, Inaba stumbled along on autopilot, as though her brain was still struggling to process everything that had taken place. Then, finally, she opened her mouth to speak.

“I worried about that shit to the point of passing out, and yet they think it’s somehow less important than lunch?! Shouldn’t they care a little more than that, at least?!”

She was completely right.

Though, depending on one’s interpretation, maybe to them this just wasn’t worth getting worked up over in the first place. After all, she was just... born that way. That said, Taichi didn’t find her stupid for worrying about it as much as she had... because, again, depending on one’s interpretation, it was serious enough to affect her entire life.

Inaba sighed. “It all feels so idiotic now... What the hell was I even worried about? What did I freak out for?”

If she was already starting to change her mind about it, then maybe that proved it wasn’t as big of a deal as she’d originally thought. And as far as Taichi was concerned, that was a good thing.

“...Well, whatever. At least now I’ve got critical dirt on you... and that means I have you utterly at my mercy for the rest of your high school career.”

...This was not a “whatever”-level statement for Taichi.

“Look, uh, Inaba... Could you maybe suppress that memory... or ideally, erase it entirely...?”

“Fuck no.”

...His only option would be to spend the rest of high school kissing her ass.

Taichi sighed like his life was over. Inaba burst out laughing and moved to slap him on the back. But then, she stopped short and put her hand on his shoulder.

“But since I won’t be forgetting your secret, I’ll tell you one of mine. That way we’re in the same boat.” She drew her lips right up to his ear, and he caught a whiff of something sugary, like honey. As she whispered, her hot breath gently brushed against his skin. “I’ve touched myself thinking about you, too.”

Instantly, he was hit with a mix of embarrassment, shock, and panic.

“Wh... wha...?!”

Then... that means... she... you know... about... you-know-what...?!

Meanwhile, Inaba cackled. Evidently she found his utter lack of composure highly entertaining.

Chapter 9: In Love and Death

Monday morning rolled around.

“What’s the story with you and Iori these days, anyway?!”

It seemed Inaba had made a full recovery over the weekend. Possibly more than that. She was *distressingly* enthusiastic.

“Wh-What do you mean? There’s nothing to tell!”

Even after Inaba’s admission, nothing of note had changed in the CRC. At this point, the five of them had built up such a tolerance to the body-swap that it seemed nothing was liable to shake them anymore. They were still on edge, of course, as the situation was still unpredictably volatile, but lately they’d made their peace with it somewhat.

Was this what «Heartseed» was hoping to see? If so, did that mean this would never end? And if not... what would befall them next?

Meanwhile, there was one lingering concern on Taichi’s mind: Nagase.

“Look, I know you two had some kind of deep conversation after you walked me home the other day. So I figured I’d just wait and see what developed from there, and sure enough, here we are, right back at square one! Goddamnit... What, you’ve got a sex drive but no spine? Is that it?!”

“Could we please not talk about my sex drive first thing in the morning? Knowing you, you’ll take any opportunity to bring up *that one secret*, and frankly I don’t want to risk it!”

Honestly, there was no stopping her—but damn it, he had to try.

“I should think you understand at this point just how fragile she is.”

“Well... yeah, I guess... How did *you* find out about it, anyway?”

“You’d be surprised. Our friendship goes way back, actually. Maybe someday we’ll tell you about it... But that’s not important right now! Tch... I didn’t want to have to do this, but you give me no choice. Drastic times call for drastic

measures!”

Whatever it was, it must’ve been pretty drastic indeed if even Inaba was hesitant to pull the trigger... and Taichi wasn’t sure he wanted to find out what it was.



There was a quiet little nook out behind the East Wing building—a relatively secluded spot often utilized as a convenient place for love confessions, or so the rumor mill liked to claim.

It was lunch period, and currently there were five people present at the scene: KiriYama Yui and Aoki Yoshifumi, who were in the middle of a private conversation, and Taichi, Inaba, and Nagase, who were spying on them from behind the hedges.

“Inaba... How the hell did you find out about this...?” Taichi asked the dark-haired girl crouching next to him.

“Just the other day, when me and Yui switched bodies. And before you ask, no, I wasn’t trying to snoop around on her phone on purpose, okay? The email popped up right after we switched. It was purely coincidence.”

“Then why would you take advantage of it?! Couldn’t you have, I don’t know, pretended not to see it or something?!”

“Any knowledge I gain is mine to use as I see fit... though obviously I exercise moral judgment when it comes to these things. But this doesn’t cross the line, so it’s fine. More or less.”

“What do you mean, ‘more or less’?! If this doesn’t count as crossing the line, I’d love to hear your idea of what does!”

“Shhhh! They’re talking!” Nagase cut in sharply.

Inaba had practically dragged the two of them out here, but now that it was happening right in front of them, Nagase appeared to be rather invested in the outcome.

“Jeez... Why’d you have to drag me all the way out here? Not only are we in the same class, but we’re in the same club, too! We can ‘talk’ like whenever!

And I'm hungry!" Kiriyaama complained, though her voice was laced with tension. While there was a fair bit of distance between her and the other three, the area was quiet enough to allow for easy eavesdropping.

"I wanted to have, like, a for-real conversation, though." Aoki's tone was unusually firm.

"Wh-What is it...?" Kiriyaama asked, fidgeting and shifting her weight like she was tempted to bolt out of there.

Aoki seemed to sense this, as he promptly cut to the chase without a second's delay: "I know at this point I'm basically just stating the obvious, but I'm gonna say it anyway. Kiriyaama Yui-san, I'm in love with you. Will you be my girlfriend?"

"Whoa... Even with all his usual skirt chasing, it still takes a lot of guts to say that to someone... Kudos," Inaba muttered, impressed. Meanwhile, on either side of her, Taichi and Nagase were utterly speechless.



Taichi wasn't even a part of it, and he was nervous as hell just watching it unfold. He could only imagine how Kiriya must have felt to be on the receiving end of it.

"Wh-Whuh...? Wait... what...? I... You... *Whawhawhaha?!'*" Instantly, her face flushed bright red, and she began to babble incoherently. "UGGGHHH! God! What the heck is your problem?!"

"What? Just wanted t' confess my feelings, that's all."

"It's hardly a 'confession' when I've already known since like, forever ago! I mean, you never shut up about it! And besides, you already tried this a while back, remember?! And I turned you down!"

"Yeah, but my feelings for you aren't gonna change. 'Sides, at this point, I feel like you might be comin' around—"

"No! I can't! ...Not yet." Her voice faltered, and she hung her head.

"I know. I just figured we could take it slow, y'know?" At this point, Aoki was a total enigma. Was he actually suave or totally tactless? A sharp cookie, or a witless buffoon?

"W-Well... Okay, but I'm just wondering, like... *why me?* Iori's way prettier than me, and she's got curves, and she's funny and energetic... And Inaba's drop-dead gorgeous with a model body... Plus she's really smart... And then there's me. I'm just this shrimpy little girl with no looks, no brains, and a flat chest... Although, Taichi told me that some guys like their women a little underdeveloped, so I guess there's that..."

Next to him, Inaba and Nagase whipped their heads around and skewered him with dissecting stares.

"Hey, c'mon... I didn't say *I'm* one of those guys, okay?! I was just stating facts!"

They didn't look too convinced.

"Don't be silly! There's so much to like about you, Yui! You're cute, and sweet, and pure, and innocent... I could go on and on! But the biggest thing for me is just... it's my gut. From the first moment I saw you, I knew I'd fall in love with

you. And I did. And I still am.”

“Nnn... I... Wha...?”

Serious Mode Aoki had Kiriyama at a total loss for words.

Kiriyama straightened herself up and took a deep breath, then a second, willing herself to calm down. “Okay... So why bother bringing it up now?”

“Well... How do you feel about Taichi?”

“Wh—*mmmph*!” Taichi nearly yelped in surprise, but Inaba quickly clapped a hand over his mouth.

“This is insane... It’s like something out of a movie...! Oops, sorry.” She pulled her hand away, and Taichi gasped for air.

“Y-You don’t need to clamp down that hard, you idiot! Were you trying to smother me to death?!” he hissed at her as loudly as he could get away with.

“Quiet! They’ll hear you!” Nagase snapped. She was proving to be the most rational observer of the three.

“What do you mean, how do I feel about him? Why should I tell you?”

“You *know* why. I know you’re not that dense, Yui... unlike *him*.”

“Starting to feel kind of attacked right now...” Taichi muttered to himself.

Kiriyama twirled and untwirled a strand of her chestnut hair around her finger. Then, after a moment of silence, she lowered her hand and stood up straight, as though she’d made up her mind.

“I love Taichi.”

“Wh—*mmmph*!”

“Wha—*mmggh*!”

This time Inaba was forced to reach out and press both hands over Taichi’s and Nagase’s mouths.

“As a friend.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yeah, really! You got a problem with that?!”

“Sheesh, Yui. Had me scared there for a minute. What was with that big long pause?” Inaba had an *awful* lot of complaints for someone who decided it was okay to spy on her friends.

“Wh-What about me...? You know... just wondering...”

“I hate you. As a friend.”

“What, for real?!”

“Just kidding, dummy. I know I get on your case a lot, but I get that you care about me, and I can’t really hate you for that.” Having regained control of the conversation, Kiriya’s voice steadily grew more confident. “Anyway, obviously I like you too... A-As a friend, though! Just as a *friend*!” She gestured dramatically, her entire body bobbing up and down. “But that’s... all I really have to say at this point. Sorry. I can’t be your girlfriend, Aoki... At least, not right now. I can’t date *anyone* right now.” Even from a distance, her sincerity was clear.

“Gotcha. Alright. Thanks for givin’ it to me straight, at least. I needed to hear it. If anything, I’m just happy to know I’ve got a chance, at least!”

“Yeah, yeah, whatevs! Just so you know, in terms of my personal Best Guy Friend rankings, Taichi’s got you beat by like, a long shot!”

“Say *what*?! I knew it! Taichi’s my biggest rival! ...Actually, you know somethin’, Yui? You’ve really changed lately. Normally you never woulda said somethin’ like that.”

“Well, I can’t just let it get me down forever, you know? I gotta start trying to move past it... Anyway, we’re done here, right? Back to the classroom! It’s time for lunch!” Kiriya spun neatly on her heel and started to head back into the school building. Her stride was large, with solid, confident steps—though considering her short stature, it ultimately wasn’t all that impressive.

“Wait, what?! Did you just invite me to eat with you?!”

“No, idiot! My friends are waiting for me!”

Their voices grew more and more faint until, finally, they were gone.

Inaba was the first to push herself to her feet. “Good thing we didn’t end up

spying on anything too personal. I mean, I figured we'd be safe, but there was always a possibility."

Yeah, no kidding.

Taichi stood up next. "Well, that certainly was... something..."

But Nagase continued to sit there, unmoving.

"Let's go, Nagase." He extended a hand to her, and she stared at it, blinking. After a pause, she smiled softly... and he got the sense that something was beginning to thaw beneath the chill.

Then she got to her feet, unassisted.

"I'm okay."



After school, Taichi found himself alone in the clubroom.

According to Aoki and Kiriya, homeroom had been extended for Class 1-A. Meanwhile, as CRC president and vice-president respectively, Nagase and Inaba had been summoned to the staff room for something or other.

Taichi had taken his homework out in a nominal attempt to study, but his mind was elsewhere. Admittedly, he was too busy thinking about— The door opened.

It was Nagase. She peered around the room. "Just you in here, Taichi?"

"Yep, just me."

She was acting a little... different.

"Guess I should've expected it, seeing as 1-A's still stuck in homeroom." As she spoke, she plunked herself down on the sofa, her posture perfectly straight.

"...Is that you, Inaba?"

[Nagase] quirked a brow. "Yep... It's me, alright."

"Gotcha. So where's [your body]? Is Nagase in there right now?"

"Yeah, I got switched with Nag—er, Iori. They gave [me] a little task back at the staff room, actually. Nothing she can't handle, though. I'm sure she'll be

fine.”

“The CRC may not be much of a club, but still, it can’t be easy to manage. I really appreciate all the work you guys put in for our sake.”

“Eh, it’s no big deal. So... So,” she repeated. There was a long, hesitant pause. “What did you think about the thing with Yui and Aoki at lunch?”

“What? Why do you want to know?”

“Don’t worry about it. Look, surely you have *some* sort of opinion about it, yeah?”

“Nngh... I mean, yeah... It’s just, well... Obviously I’d never experienced anything like that before, so it struck me as kind of surreal, in a way... Honestly, I can’t really offer much of an opinion beyond that. I remember feeling really blown away—but by what, I couldn’t tell you.”

Frankly, it had been downright overwhelming to witness. There’d been something almost too perfect about it, though he couldn’t quite put his finger on what.

“Hmmm...” [Nagase] stared at him for a moment.

“Why’d you want us to see that, anyway?” Taichi asked.

[Nagase]’s eyes widened like she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Taichi... Do you seriously not understand what I was getting at, you... dumb nimrod?”

“Huh...?”

At this, Taichi’s thoughts turned inward. Did he honestly not see it? Or was there some part of him that actually *did* understand her intentions, but was just playing dumb? And if so... why?

“Well... whatever. I’ll just ask you flat-out. Totally flat-out,” she repeated again, and there was another long, hesitant pause. “How do you actually feel about Iori, when it comes down to it?”

The question hit him like a semi-truck. “Man, you never pull any punches, do you, Inaba... And it’s even worse when you say it wearing [Nagase]’s face, too...” He tried to play it off a bit in his response, though he wasn’t confident he

succeeded... but he hoped it would conceal at least a bit of his pain.

“I’d say the timing has worked out great so far,” [Nagase] replied with a smirk. For some reason, it felt more stiff and awkward than usual.

“What part of this is ‘great,’ exactly? Well, anyway...” For a moment, he asked himself why he was forced to answer this—but the next moment, the words tumbled from his lips regardless. “I love the friendship we have right now... and... part of me doesn’t want to ruin that... but... well—”

Once again... the door opened.

And [Inaba] walked in.

“Hey, lori, about that errand... The goddamn teacher wasn’t around, so I’m gonna have to take care of it next ti—Wait, what’s going on?”

“You weren’t supposed to be back yet, Inaban,” the girl on the couch responded. She looked at Taichi, her eyes wide with shock.

...What?

He didn’t understand.

He thought [the person piloting Nagase’s body] was Inaba. She’d claimed as much herself. And that meant [the person piloting Inaba’s body] ought to have been Nagase.

But [the person piloting Inaba’s body] was acting an awful lot like Inaba herself. She’d referred to [the person piloting Nagase’s body] as “lori”... and in turn, [the person piloting Nagase’s body] had called her “Inaban,” a nickname only Nagase used...

Altogether, this could only mean one thing—

“Fooled you.”

[Nagase]—the real, actual Nagase lori—stood up from the couch and headed for the door... but before she could get there, Inaba reached out and grabbed her by the arm.

“What’s the matter with you, lori?!”

“Let me go, Inaban!”

“Like hell! I’m not gonna abandon you when you’re crying—Hey!”

Nagase wrested herself from Inaba’s grip and dashed out of the room. Inaba ran after her... only to return half a minute later.

“Damn it! There’s no way I can catch up to her when she’s running at full speed... Why does she have to be so goddamn athletic?! Now then, as for *you*! What the FUCK did you do to her?!” Inaba stormed over and seized Taichi by the collar.

“Gah... H-How should I know...?! She was pretending to be body-swapped with you, and then—”

“What? She was pretending to be me?”

“Yeah... She was acting dead-on exactly like you, and I totally fell for it! And then you walked in, and here we are!”

It made no sense.

...Wait. Yes it did.

He had made a promise.

He’d promised he could do it.

He’d even told her to trust him.

—No matter what happens, in the end, I’ll always know it’s you.

Had she been testing him?

No, that was stupid.

Why was he trying to make himself into the victim right now?

“Nagase was... trying to trust me...!”

But he betrayed that trust. And now he hated himself so much he wished he was dead.

He was always so scared to ruin their friendship... scared to take that next step. Instead, he went out of his way to avoid ever having to think about it. Nagase had understood that, and so had taken the initiative herself.

Inaba relinquished her grip on his collar.

“Sounds like you’ve had an epiphany of some sort.”

“Yeah... An epiphany that I’m a lowlife piece of trash.”

“Hmm... Well then, want me to smack you one?”

“Why would I want th—No, you don’t have to—Bwaggh!” Before he could finish, he felt the impact of her palm against his left cheek. “Owww... How could you—Actually, you know what? Thanks. I think that was just the push I needed.”

Don’t be afraid. Don’t run away. Face it. Confront it. Move past it.

Nagase was kind enough to trust him, and if he was going to honor that with the respect it deserved, then it was his turn to move forward.

Maybe people would laugh at him for thinking that, considering he had already failed once.

He didn’t care.

They could scoff at him all they liked, but the fact of the matter was, that initial failure was precisely the reason he needed to take action.

“God, you two are so freakin’ awkward. It’s exhausting just to watch,” Inaba muttered as she flung herself down on the sofa. “Go on, now. Get going. I doubt either of you need me to chaperone you.” She waved her hand in his direction without so much as a glance, as though she were shooing a dog.

“...Okay.”

He had messed up so badly, he’d hurt Nagase in the process. He needed to face that reality, face himself, face his feelings. And so, with that resolve, Taichi left the clubroom.

On his way out, he shot one final glance back at Inaba, but she continued to avoid his gaze.

After dashing down all three flights of stairs, Taichi discovered a critical problem.

“Where did she even go...?”

For now, he decided to check the rest of the school— But before he could, he noticed someone staring at him, hands on her hips, hair tied back, glasses glinting, radiating an air of utter superiority. It was the president of Class 1-C, Fujishima Maiko. She moved to block his path.

Personally, Taichi was in no mood to waste time dealing with her— “Yaegashi-kun!”

—but now that she was screaming his name, he couldn’t very well ignore her.

“What do... you want... Fuji...shima...?” he asked between gasps of breath. “I’m kinda... in a rush...”

“Are you the one who made Nagase-san cry?”

Bullseye.

“Y-Yeah...”

Fujishima took a step closer. “Well, I’m not privy to the details, but as we all know, any man who tramples on a delicate flower deserves one good slap to the face,” she stated matter-of-factly. “Are you prepared to face your punishment?”

Taichi had never heard of this rule. “What are you t—No, forget it. I humbly resign myself to my fate.” After what he’d done, he deserved that much, at least. Plus, maybe it was the fastest way to get her out of his hair.

“What have we here? Your left cheek’s looking a bit swollen. I’m guessing you’ve already been punished on that side, then.”

“Y-Yeah... That was from—Gwaagh?!” Once again, he felt a red-hot impact against his left cheek. “Owww... Weren’t you supposed to slap the *other* side?! That hurt so bad, it actually looped back around and started to feel kind of good!”

Breaking news: Fujishima Maiko was a sadist.

“Listen... Do you really think men and women are meant to pair off with each other? Tell me your thoughts, Yaegashi-kun.”

Taichi wasn’t sure he understood what she was getting at with that question. “Look, Fujishima, I don’t really have time to talk right now.”

He moved one step to the right—and she did the same, blocking his path once again.

“That’s not important. Don’t you think it makes more sense to share the person you love with the rest of the world?”

This time he moved two steps to the left—but she followed suit, her expression perfectly blank.

“But it’s not good to leave things one-sided, I guess. You’re not truly fit to love a person unless that person loves you in return. Remember that. It’s important.” She tossed him a key with a red strap attached—a bike key, judging from its size and shape. “You don’t bring your bike to school, right? Use mine.”

“What?”

“Turns out I wasn’t good enough for her. And I’m guessing the one she wants is you... So you’d better get going. She ran through the gates and to the left.”

Baffled by this unexpected gesture, Taichi stared down at the key in his palm. “Fujishima... Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. It’s what Nagase-san needs, after all. What could possibly be more important in this world than soothing her pain and drying her tears?” With that, Fujishima strode off towards the bike lot, willing him to follow her.

Who told her she was allowed to kick so much ass?

He could have kissed her right then and there.

“Oh yeah, and one last thing. Just so we’re clear... I like boys, too.”

Correction: Apparently she was a *bisexual* sadist.

Taichi raced through town astride Fujishima’s commuter bike. He’d called Nagase dozens of times, but she never picked up. Evidently either her phone was dead, or she’d turned it off on purpose.

An hour flew by. As it turned out, trying to find a single person in an entire town was akin to digging for a needle in a haystack.

“You were on foot, so you can’t have gone far... And you left your stuff in the

clubroom, so I doubt you went home... Maybe I should swing back by the school..."

As he contemplated his next move, he rode past the large river that neatly bisected the city into eastern and western halves.

And that was when he caught sight of a silhouette sitting atop the fence lining the river, facing the water, dyed red beneath the glitter of the sunset. Her presence there was so undeniably striking, the melancholy of twilight seemed to exist solely to bring her into sharp relief.

Nagase Iori.

Her ponytail swayed gently in the breeze, brushing against her slight shoulders—so perfect and picturesque, it felt like a scene from a movie... and she was the star.

The breeze picked up just then, and she turned her face away. That took her sight straight to Taichi. Her eyes widened in surprise.

"T-Taichi—Whoa!"

"Careful!"

She lost her balance—and narrowly managed to right herself at the last second.

Taichi heaved a sigh of relief. The fence was a wall of solid concrete that wasn't meant to be climbed. Granted, a fall from that height wouldn't kill her, but still.

"Whew... That almost gave me a heart attack... Anyway, Taichi, what are you doing here?"

She spun around and hopped down off the fence. As she approached, he could see streaks of dried tears on her cheeks, and his heart ached. He parked the bike on the side of the road and bowed his head.

"I'm so sorry I didn't figure it out... after everything I said... everything I promised... I failed you in the most pathetic way possible."

"I wonder what it means to be human... To be 'oneself,' you know? As long as your body stays the same, you could be an entirely different person on the

inside and no one would ever notice... or so you'd think. Turns out, the second I pretend to be someone else, I really do stop being me... Oh, but I'm not blaming you or anything! Seriously, you didn't do anything wrong here! It's totally my fault... Obviously you were just going to take whatever I said at face value. We've all established a mutual trust between us, after all... Look, um, I'm really sorry for what I did. And I won't ever do it again. Honest... I'm really, really sorry." She hung her head guiltily.

"You were just trying to work through your issues and move forward. I appreciate that. And now it's my turn."

He'd never tried to face it, never paused to reflect on it. So naturally, he hadn't been able to push past it. Why hesitate? What was he so afraid of? Was it just his lack of prior experience? Surely anyone would fear the unknown.

And the more perfect something seemed, the scarier it became... and the harder it was to know how to handle it.

But it didn't pay to be a coward forever. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Admittedly, there was no guarantee he could truly move forward in the first place. There was a chance his dreams would be dashed. Maybe he would get hurt.

But what he stood to gain offered him limitless potential.

Why hadn't he realized?

Accept it, confront it, reflect on it, move past it.

"You know... There's been a lot going on lately. Like, seriously, a lot," he continued.

He thought back on everything that had happened with Aoki, with Kiriya, with Inaba... and with Nagase. By accepting it, confronting it, and reflecting on it, he had gained the strength to move forward.

"Honestly, I learned a lot. And I realized that when it comes down to it..."

He could see himself reflected in her eyes.

"...it turns out I'm actually the deadpan idiot of the group!"

“I know.”

...He'd intended for it to be more of a revelatory statement.

“Okay, well... The point is, I really look up to you!”

“What? *You* look up to *me*?”

“Yeah! I wish I could be more expressive like you. You know, laughing, yelling, smiling, frowning... Feeling down, then cheering myself back up again... Joking around, then getting all serious... The list goes on and on, really.”

He sincerely admired all the joy and color Nagase brought into their lives.

“B-But... that was all just... me acting out... all my different personas... I'm no role model, okay? I... I can't even tell you who the real 'me' *is*. I'm just... damaged goods.”

Again, she revealed her darkness... but this time, Taichi had something of a solution.

Was he sure he wanted to go through with it? It was a gamble. There was no telling whether his estimate was accurate or off the mark. And after messing up once already, chances of recovery were fairly low.

But if there was even a chance it could help Nagase, then he would push forward.

“Are you really, though?” he mused.

Nagase's jaw dropped, and she stared at him blankly. Then, slowly, her expression hardened... into icy steel.

“Excuse me? What are you trying to say, Taichi? Whatever you think you know about me, you're sorely mistaken.”

Her stoic, unfeeling aggression threatened to make him recoil... but he would not be cowed.

“Messing around. Being a ditz. Getting embarrassed. Making dirty jokes. Going overboard. Causing trouble. Getting caught up in the moment. Secretly scheming. Losing control. Having a strong sense of intuition. Failing to think ahead, or overthinking completely. Being optimistic sometimes and pessimistic

other times. Purposely goofing off right before having a serious talk to hide your awkwardness. Making stupid comments one minute, then launching into a deep conversation the next. Letting all your darkness show. Cheering yourself up. Suddenly going numb and cold. Being childish. Being mature. Being sweet. Being mischievous. Secretly paying attention when it seems like you're not—

“Uhhh... What are you talking about right now...?”

“I'm talking about you. Nagase Iori.”

Nagase froze in shock. For a moment she pursed her lips together as if to contemplate this information, then opened her mouth to speak. “Yeah, I know, right? Who knows which one is the real ‘me’... Actually, probably none of them —”

“All of them.”

“.....What?”

“They're all you.”

“...No, seriously... what...?”

“All of them! Every last one of them is Nagase Iori, damn it!”

Maybe that was all there was to it, really.

“Uh, hang on a minute... That's not humanly possible! Nobody could possibly be all those things at once!”

“Sure they can. Everybody has different sides to them. It's just a matter of degrees. In your case, you have a lot. In my case, not so much. End of story.”

“But... I've been purposely changing myself based on each person I—”

“Everybody does that! You just happen to do it a lot more than most. Besides, didn't you say you've been starting to lose control of it lately?”

“Yeah, but... but that's because... I don't know how to interact with anyone unless I take a minute to choose a persona beforehand...!”

“And? Everybody needs a minute to warm up to someone before they can be themselves.”

“B-But... I don't even have preferences... I just pick whatever...”

“Okay, and? Maybe you just like a lot of stuff equally, and certain things jump up the rankings in certain situations.”

“But... but I couldn’t even choose a club for myself...!”

“How is that really any different from all the people who pick a club because it seems low-effort, or because their friends are joining?”

“...Have you just been playing devil’s advocate with me this whole time?”

“...Pretty much.”

“At least pretend to deny it, you dip!”

Nagase burst into a giggle fit that had her clutching at her sides. Her laughter was infectious, and Taichi started laughing too—which made her laugh harder—which made *him* laugh harder in kind—and together they quickly spiraled out of control. It was so much fun, it felt like all the joy in the world had gathered there specifically for that moment.

Some time later, Nagase finally caught her breath. “Hahaha... Whew... I’m so tired... Anyway, when you put it like that, I look up to you, too. Nothing ever gets to you, no matter what happens... You have this strong sense of self, and you don’t let anyone else change that. I feel like no matter what version of me I throw at you, you’ll always stay the same, and it’s just... really reassuring... I admire people like that. People who can offer that sense of stability to others.”

Oh.

This was the moment Taichi realized that, though at first glance they seemed like total opposites, they were actually just two sides of the same coin. He was less outwardly emotive than most; she was more outwardly emotive than most. But it wasn’t by a wide margin, and ultimately it didn’t really matter. It wouldn’t ruin their lives. Taichi himself hadn’t agonized over it at all. But after everything she’d been through, Nagase had ensconced herself in a deep and critical misconception.

That was all there was to it.

Compared to a total loss of emotion, or an emotional rampage—the sort of thing a fictional protagonist would endure—their problems seemed pretty

insignificant in the long run. But even insignificant problems could still take their toll. A single person could easily be crushed under its weight. And the number of so-called “insignificant” problems in the world far outweighed the significant ones.

But again, this wasn’t a critical issue. It was just how the world worked... and he was just one insignificant person with insignificant troubles, trying to survive.

There was one thing he needed to do right now—and not because he was a martyr, that much he could say for certain. It was just as much for his sake as it was for hers.

So he decided to ask.

“Nagase Iori, I’m in love with you. Will you be my girlfriend?”

Maybe two broken people could walk hand in hand, fill each other’s gaps, make all the problems feel small.

For a moment, Nagase opened and shut her mouth a few times like she was struggling to find the words. Her face was so red, he could tell it wasn’t just the light of the sunset.

After a few blinks, she hung her head, slumping her shoulders... as though she were clinging to something, feeling her way blindly through it, cherishing the moment.

And then she looked up...

And when she did...

The look on her face was—perfectly blank.

All at once, the color drained from her cheeks.

The light left her eyes.

The energy drained from her very being.

Like a version of [Gotou Ryuuzen] they’d once encountered.

And then... it spoke.

“Hellooo... Long time no see... I apologize... Oh, right... This is «Heartseed»... But I’m guessing you could already tell...”

...Taichi had forgotten that the five of them were currently at «Heartseed»'s mercy, and that meant anything was possible, no matter how far-fetched.

If «Heartseed» could possess [Gotou's body], there was nothing preventing it from doing the same with [Nagase's body].

“Oh, right... First things first, let me apologize... I'm sorry... Apologize to Nagase-san for me later, please... I'm sincerely sorry, from the... well... let's say the middle of my heart... Oh, right... I should have said 'from the bottom of my heart'... Still, you five brought this upon yourselves. You're all just a bit *too* interesting, you see...” [Nagase] «Heartseed» pulled [her] cell phone and wallet out of [her] pockets and tossed them at Taichi. Then, in a startlingly fluid motion, [she] hopped up onto the riverside fence, facing Taichi below on the street.

The wind blew. [Her] school uniform fluttered.

Taichi's heartbeat jolted so hard, he half-expected it to come bursting out of his ribcage.

In all his life, he'd never sensed impending despair quite this viscerally before.

And then, the next instant, he saw it—the mere shadow of his sparkling [Nagase], reduced to a listless husk.

“Wait... What are you doing...?” he croaked, his throat already bone-dry, edging toward «Heartseed» to avoid provoking any drastic moves.

But «Heartseed» neither noticed nor cared. “...I said I'm sorry, didn't I...?”

[Nagase's body] tilted backwards atop the narrow, unsteady footing... and then [she]—«Heartseed»—plummeted headfirst into the water's depths.

“No... *This can't be happening!*”

But right as he bolted to the fence—everything went dark.

Then his senses returned.

He was seated on something firm.

Surrounded by the familiar scenery of the clubroom.

And Inaba and Aoki were staring back at him.

Four members of the CRC sat in a deserted waiting room on the second floor of the local general hospital, surrounded by benches and vending machines and not much else.

As for the sole missing member, Nagase... she was currently in the ICU.

Aoki, Kiriyaama, and Inaba were all pale as ghosts, and Taichi had a feeling he was, too. His mind was strangely clear and rational.

“Goddamnit! Iori-chan’s hangin’ by a thread in there an’ we can’t do a damn thing for her!” Aoki slammed his fists down on his thighs, his voice raw and nasal.

“Don’t blame yourself, Aoki. It won’t change anything. We’re all powerless either way,” said Inaba quietly. She was curt, and yet there was a note of compassion in her tone.

“Guys... I’m so sorry... If only I’d tried harder... Back when I switched into [Taichi]... maybe I should’ve just... jumped in after her... But I heard somewhere... that like, trying to rescue someone can put you in danger yourself... and that the ‘correct’ thing to do is to call for help or find a flotation device... so I...” Kiriyaama choked out between sobs. She looked like she was on the verge of a breakdown.

Inaba pulled her into a tight hug, pressing her face to her chest and gently stroking her long chestnut hair. “You did the right thing, Yui. Think about it—you kept a level head and took action to save her. If you hadn’t made the right choice back there, things could’ve turned out so much worse... I’m proud of you.”

The last part made Kiriyaama sob even harder. But Inaba didn’t stop her. Maybe she wanted her to let it all out.

“Maybe I should’ve—Ow!”

Before Taichi could finish, Inaba kicked him hard in the shin. Tears welled in his eyes, and he shot her a look—to find that she was grimacing in pain.

She drew her lips to his ear. “For the love of god, don’t you start whining

too... Just... Just suck it up. I can't take much more than this... My heart feels like it's going to shatter... I need you to stay strong for the rest of us... *Please...*" Her voice was faint and hoarse.

The fall. The rescue. The ride to the hospital. The statement from the nurse lady: "critical condition." Every moment was a rollercoaster of stress, and Taichi realized the only reason they'd survived it intact was thanks to Inaba, taking it all in stride.

Taichi looked into her eyes and nodded firmly, and she nodded back, looking ever-so-faintly relieved.

None of this was their fault. It was all «Heartseed»'s doing. They knew that... and yet still they couldn't help but blame themselves. They needed to pretend. They needed an outlet for their emotions.

The four of them were alone in the waiting room. The hospital had yet to get in touch with Nagase's mother; apparently she wasn't at home. Gotou, however, was supposed to be on his way from the school.

Taichi stared up at the dark, drab ceiling. One of the fluorescent bulbs overhead was dying, its glow weak and unsteady.

Then he heard it.

Footsteps.

Someone was headed their way.

An eerie silence filled the room as the four of them tensed up. They had no way of knowing who was about to arrive... but they had a feeling it was «Heartseed».

Try not to worry about it, it had told them. I'm not trying to pick a fight with you, it had said. I would greatly appreciate it if you could forget I ever existed.

True to its word, it had kept its distance—but after everything it had done, Taichi strongly doubted it would just sit there on the sidelines and do nothing.

And then it walked into the waiting room.

As with their first meeting back in the clubroom nearly a month ago, it was piloting [Gotou Ryuuzen]. But they could tell at a glance it was «Heartseed». No

living human could possibly imitate its lifelessness.

“Hey there... Oh... You all look rather furious, I see... Please don’t make this complicated... I beg of you from the bottom of my heart,” [Gotou] «Heartseed» stated blankly, showing no trace of remorse for what it had done. In fact, its utter lack of interest in the current circumstances was downright alarming.

What were they supposed to do now? What was the correct option? Get angry? Tremble in fear? Curse it out? Demand an explanation for its actions? Confront it? Run away? Punch it? Mourn?

The more he gazed into the abyss that was «Heartseed», the more uncertain he became. He was sinking ever deeper into a sea of swirling emotion... and he couldn’t see a way out.

Meanwhile, as everyone else struggled to find an answer, Inaba chose anger.

“What are *you* doing here? What the fuck do you want?” Her voice was frighteningly quiet, hinting at an impending explosion bubbling beneath the surface.

“...Thank you for asking, Inaba-san... That saves us some time... Oh, perhaps Yaegashi-san went ahead and told you everything I did... Oh, right... I should have cut to the chase, but instead I went off on another tangent... And now I’m on a tangent about my tangents... Forget it. Where was I... Let’s see... 30 minutes from now, with a marginal degree of error... [Nagase Iori-san’s body] will perish,” «Heartseed» stated matter-of-factly, as though this were already established.

If that’s your idea of a joke, it isn’t fucking funny, Taichi thought.

“The hell are you talking about, you son of a bitch?! You decide who lives or dies?! Is that it?!” Inaba roared.

“Don’t be silly, Inaba-san... Of course I can’t... I’m just a nobody named «Heartseed»... But even I can see the truth when it’s right in front of me... So anyway... [Nagase’s body] is going to die. Are you with me so far?”

“As if! Why should we believe a word you say?!” Kiriya shot back, her voice still wobbly with emotion.

She was right. They had no obligation to take its word at face value.

“Well, ultimately you’re all free to believe whatever you want... but ideally I’d like you to believe me on this... If it turns out I came all this way for nothing, I’ll lose motivation completely... Oh, but... I didn’t really have any to begin with... Truth be told, though, I do have a tiny bit right now... since you’re all so fascinating... Oh, I’m wasting time rambling again when I still have more to tell you... Okay, are you ready...? Inaba-san... Please remember this... I have neither the energy nor the will to repeat myself.” It paused, then carried on in its usual monotone drawl. “As of now, your souls are all freely possessing [each other’s bodies]... And, naturally, each [body] can host one soul... This means, of course, that if one [body] dies, one soul must ‘go down with the ship,’ yes? But... the important thing to remember here is that the soul who dies doesn’t necessarily have to match the [body]... After all... You’ve already proven you can manage yourselves in [other people’s bodies] just fine... So, I have a proposal for you. Why don’t the four of you decide which soul will die with [Nagase-san’s body]? As an added bonus... For the next 30 minutes, I’ll allow you to swap bodies at will... Just say the word and I’ll make it so... And that’s the gist of it.”

It was clearly out of its mind.

“Wait... So you *can* control who we swap with...? I thought... I thought it was s’posed to be totally random...!” Aoki muttered, utterly aghast.

“Don’t be silly... If I can set it so that you all swap at random... do you really think I somehow wouldn’t be able to control specific swaps? Oh, but... just to clarify, all of your swaps thus far have been completely, one-hundred-percent random... It would have been way too much work otherwise...” [Gotou] «Heartseed» commented lethargically.

Inaba leapt to her feet and lunged at [Gotou]. “Go fuck yourself!”

“Ugh... You’re so short-tempered...” As «Heartseed» spoke, Inaba suddenly stopped short. Then, the next moment, she looked around the room.

“Huh...? Did we switch...?”

Judging from her confusion, Taichi knew—Inaba must have switched with Nagase. And that meant Nagase was now standing right in front of them, piloting [Inaba’s body].

She backed away from [Gotou] a few steps, then turned to look at the others. “Uhh... Taichi, what are you doing here...? Weren’t we just over by the river...?”

After being possessed by «Heartseed», then losing consciousness, time must have stopped for her right at the moment of his confession.

What kind of monster would toy with them like this?

All at once, rage swelled up in his chest. He rounded on [Gotou] «Heartseed» and reached for [his] collar. “Just leave us the f—Huh?”

The next instant, his body was floating in mid-air... and the world flipped upside-down. For the briefest of moments, he saw «Heartseed»’s dull, dark, empty eyes—and then his back slammed hard into something. “Guh!”

The next thing he knew, he was staring at the ceiling. His back didn’t hurt... but his spirit was in tatters, knowing they were powerless to stop this unknowable being known as «Heartseed» from crushing them underfoot.

They were just insignificant humans. They couldn’t stand up against such a terrifying enemy.

Taichi couldn’t even protect the girl he claimed to love.

“Like I said... You all have more important business to be dealing with... Now then... I’ll be back when it’s time... Please be sure to make your decision by then.”

With that, «Heartseed» wandered off, and they were powerless to stop it. All they could do was watch it go.

“T-Taichi! You okay?! What the heck is Gossan doing here?!” [Inaba] (Nagase) dashed over. He took her hand, and she helped him to his feet... but meanwhile he couldn’t bear to look at her anxious, panicked face.

He didn’t want to believe it.

So instead he whispered, “Switch Nagase and Inaba... please.”

It shouldn’t have been possible, despite «Heartseed» claiming it would “allow it.”

And yet—

“Huh...? Why am I holding hands with you...? And where the fuck is «Heartseed»?!”

Sure enough, Inaba switched back into [her body], right before his very eyes... which meant Nagase had probably gone back to [her body] in the ICU.

With this, he was forced to accept the truth.

“So basically, we have to choose its victim? Why?! Why are we doing this...?! What the hell does it want from us...?!” Inaba spat, her voice dripping with venom.

“Iori’s gonna die...? No... There’s just no way... The doctors have gotta be doing their best in there...!” Kiriya whimpers.

“Yeah... Maybe «Heartseed»’s just talking out of its ass. But we have to be prepared for the possibility that it isn’t. As long as there’s even a tiny chance, we have to take it into consideration... no matter how cruel and unfair it may be. If it’s telling the truth, then this is our only chance, and... I really hate that I have to say this, but... we have to do as it says.”

Inaba was right. They couldn’t run from it even if they wanted to... because they had no way of knowing whether «Heartseed» was lying.

“...God fucking *DAMN IT!* How could I let this happen?!” Inaba slammed her fist down on the thin leather of the bench cushion.

“Someone’s gotta die... to save the rest of us...” Aoki mumbled to himself, clutching his head.

Supposing «Heartseed» was telling the truth... That meant [Nagase Iori’s body] would perish, and with it, one of five possible souls. Obviously, none of them wanted to die... and that meant, as Aoki said, that someone would have to sacrifice themselves to protect the others.

Death. The ultimate pain. He couldn’t even imagine it... but he knew he didn’t want anyone else to have to bear that burden.

And that meant—

“If one of us has to sacrifice themselves, let it be me.”

I want to do this. Please.

“Yui... Punch him in the face as hard as you can,” said Inaba.

“Roger that. I’ll deck him good,” answered Kiriyama.

“Uh, guys? Do you *know* how hard she can hit? That’s not—” Aoki cut in, but before he could finish, Kiriyama was already closing in on Taichi with bloodshot eyes, her expression vicious, and reddish-brown hair flying in every direction like a raging tiger.

He only saw her fist after it had already collided with his skull. He heard his bones creak, and for a moment he thought his head had been knocked clean off his neck. His body flew backwards, and he hit the floor hard. It felt like a bomb had detonated against his left cheek. He put a hand to it and groaned in agony.

“Don’t even JOKE about that! YOU HEAR ME?!” Inaba crouched down and grabbed Taichi by the collar with her fists, yanking him upright. “What the *FUCK* is your problem?! You think you want to be our sacrifice?! Have you stopped to think about the people you’d leave behind?! How WE feel?! You act like you care about the rest of us, but really you only ever think about yourself, you *goddamn narcissist!*” she roared, right up in his face.

Kiriyama had punched him with all her sincerity. Inaba was screaming at him from the bottom of her heart. It struck a chord... and something inside him broke down.

“Yeah?! And?! So what?! I... I just hate seeing people suffer right in front of me, okay?! Whenever someone’s hurting, I can imagine how they must be feeling... and then my imagination keeps going and going and going until it’s pure agony! I HATE it! So I tell myself it’s just easier if I bear the brunt of the pain myself! At least that way it’s bearable! That way my imagination can’t blow it out of proportion! So yeah, I’m not doing it for anyone else... I’m being a martyr for *myself!*”

It was the first time Taichi had ever tried to express the ambiguous feelings lurking in the back of his mind... and he succeeded. His cheek felt like it was on fire, but the warmth wasn’t just from the pain. He was crying, too.

Beyond his blurry vision, Inaba stared back at him in shock. Then her

expression softened into affection, and she let go of his collar. “Alright... I think I understand you now. God, you’re such a freak... and I mean that in the best way possible. You empathize with other people so much, you feel their pain, and it makes you want to suffer it yourself instead... You’re so goddamn sweet and awkward and stupid, you know that? If you know what it’s like to empathize with other people’s pain, then surely you realize we feel the same way about you, right? Even if it’s what you want... When you suffer, we suffer too... Especially anyone who might think of you as more than a friend.” She paused to roughly wipe away his tears. “Forgive my lack of tact, but... thank you for being honest with me.”

“Taichi, I’m so sorry!” Kiriya collapsed to her knees next to him, tears in her eyes. “I know I really hurt you... I’m sorry... I’m sorry I hurt you... I’m so sorry...!”

“It’s okay, Kiriya. Thank you. I know you were just trying to knock some sense into me. And I’m sorry, too. I’m sure it must have hurt you to do that... both physically and emotionally.”

“The one thing I want you to get is... if you died... it would hurt the rest of us worse than a thousand of those punches! So please... please don’t talk like that!” she wailed.

“Maybe now he actually understands,” Inaba muttered beside her.

Their kindness and love seeped into his heart, and he realized just how selfish he’d been all this time. Maybe sometimes he had taken action purely out of a desire to help others... but there were times in which he had been motivated solely by his own self-interest. And if it hadn’t been for the body-swap, it was possible he never would have stopped to think critically about his behavior.

But now he had learned a bit about himself and a lot about the others—and if he kept on accepting and reflecting and moving forward, he had a feeling he stood a lot more to gain.

The rest of their lives were waiting for them. Maybe it wouldn’t all be perfect, but it would still be a blast. And it really, really sucked that one of them wouldn’t be there to see it.

It was so hopeless, words like “cruel” or “grim” or “tragic” all felt like an

understatement.

“What are we supposed to do now...?!” It was all Taichi could think to say.

Then Aoki piped up.

“I... I think lori-chan’s gotta die with [her body].”

Time froze for a moment.

He didn’t want to consider it. He couldn’t.

“Wh... Are you hearing yourself right now?! ‘lori’s gotta die’?! Don’t even *say* that!” Kiriya hissed like a wildcat.

“You think I *want* to say it?! Of course I don’t! But someone’s gotta, don’t they?!” His voice fell to a tiny, almost inaudible whisper. “We can’t make Inabacchan do all the heavy lifting around here.”

“Hah... You people... You’re all too nice for your own good...” Inaba muttered with a tremor in her voice.

Deep down, everyone understood. To spare Nagase from death meant forcing her to live on in [someone else’s body]. She would have to inhabit someone else’s empty shell and pretend to be them forever... and there was simply no reframing that into an option that made sense. Nevertheless, Taichi’s train of thought continued to run around in circles.

“Anyway, we can’t just decide this without her... I think we gotta tell lori-chan what’s goin’ on, yeah?”

“Good point... I guess we have to tell her... God, I’m so pathetic, couching my words with shit like ‘I guess’...!”

“Well, since I’m the one who suggested it, I’ll do the switch,” Aoki replied. “Please switch me, Aoki Yoshifumi, with Nagase lori.”

A split-second later, [Aoki] blinked. [He] stared down in puzzlement at the other three sitting on the ground, then spoke. “Uhhh... Okay, now I *really* don’t understand what’s going on...”

Inaba had taken up the mantle of explaining everything to [Aoki] (Nagase).

“This is going to be hard for you to hear, so I’m just going to say it,” Inaba

said, her voice firm, looking straight into [Aoki's] eyes. "Iori... you're... possibly... going to die." It must have hurt just to say the words, but Inaba didn't let it show.

[Aoki's] face tensed. Evidently Nagase could tell from Inaba's tone that she wasn't joking around. [He] shifted [his] gaze around, eyes wide like a scared puppy, until [he] settled on Taichi. For the briefest of moments, [his] expression softened, and Taichi gazed back, hoping to offer Nagase the slightest bit of reassurance in her hour of despair... though it frustrated him to no end that he couldn't do anything more.

Next, [Aoki] (Nagase) looked over at Kiriya. Tears rolled down her cheeks, but she bit down on her lip to keep herself quiet. Not a single sob slipped past.

[Aoki] (Nagase) turned back to Taichi, then closed [his] eyes and pursed [his] lips together. After a few seconds of silence, [he] opened [his] eyes once more.

"Okay, continue," she said, with a determined expression that nearly gave him goosebumps. He'd never seen anyone look quite so... resigned.

Nagase remained quiet for Inaba's entire explanation, nodding occasionally as she listened—and the silence persisted even after Inaba was finished. Taichi couldn't begin to imagine what sort of emotions were swirling in her heart after all that.

But right as everyone started to figure she needed some time to process... she smiled. "Guess I'll just have to die, then, won't I?" Her voice was sunny, without a trace of grief. "Aw, man... I'm gonna die, huh? Hehe... Feels weird to be standing here talking to everybody, knowing it's my last moments and all."

"It's not a for-sure thing yet..." Kiriya replied in a tiny, feeble voice.

"Yeah, I know. But it's probably better to assume it is. Don't wanna leave the world with any regrets, y'know?"

She sounded so... *normal*. Taichi's eyes grew hot. "Nagase, listen... Like Inaba explained earlier... It doesn't *have* to be you who—"

"Yes it does," Nagase answered firmly. Though she wore Aoki's face, the smile on [his] lips was unmistakably hers. "I'm *not* letting anyone switch with me. That's *not* okay." The words pierced him right down to his core. "My identity is

based on both my personality *and* my appearance. Without one or the other, it's not really 'me' anymore. I have to have both. I almost lost sight of who I am once before... but then a certain someone helped me find myself again, and now I'm proud to be the person I am." She let the words hang in the air for a moment as she looked around at each of them... as though she were about to reveal the trump card that would settle the score once and for all. "Besides, I could never live with the guilt of killing someone's soul and taking over their [body]! That's way too heavy."

No one could argue with that.

Then she asked them to grant her one last wish: "Could I talk to each of you, one on one?"

It would be her final moments with each of them.

Nobody wanted to accept it... but as the clock ticked on, they had no choice. «Heartseed» had given them just 30 short minutes, and time was running out.

First, Nagase switched out of [Aoki's body] into her own, then switched into [Kiryama's body] in order to speak with him. Afterwards, she asked to speak to Inaba, and as they passed each other in the hall, Inaba saw tears running down Aoki's cheeks.

Then, after talking with Inaba, Nagase swapped bodies with her in order to talk to Kiriyama.

Taichi and Aoki sat on a bench in the hall, a short distance from the waiting room. They didn't speak.

Out of the corner of his eye, Taichi could see the door to the ICU where [Nagase's body] lay unconscious, inhabited by Inaba. Was she just floating in an empty void somewhere?

Then he heard footsteps down the hall, accompanied by sniffing.

"T-Taichi... Iori's... asking for you..." Kiriyama called in a wavery voice.

Taichi nodded silently and headed down the hallway to the waiting room.

Glossy, jet-black hair that hung straight to her shoulders... a slim and angular body... and a sweet smile that looked decidedly out of place. She was [Inaba],

but she wasn't Inaba. Everything about her screamed Nagase.

"Sup, Taichi?" [Inaba] (Nagase) called out, like it was any other day.

"Hey there, Nagase," he answered in kind. He felt strangely at peace. Somehow, mourning their impending loss didn't seem nearly as important as savoring these precious final moments.

"That's weird... Why is it you're the only one acting normal? Everyone else had this look on their face like they were already on their way to my funeral."

"...Should I put on my funeral face, too?"

"Noooo, no, no! Please don't! Seriously, it makes it harder to talk... and this is our super-special 'final conversation' or whatever, so I've got a lot of important stuff to say. First things first... I wanted to thank you. After everything you said, all my worries... well, they didn't magically go away, but they definitely got a whole lot smaller. So... thank you, Taichi. All things considered, I think maybe I could learn to love myself now."

Evidently it was safe to say she had come to accept herself for who she was. It would take time to move past it entirely, but she could just take it slow—baby steps.

Except... there was no time left for her.

"Also, afterwards... you confessed that you're in love with me... and I haven't given you an answer yet, so let me do that now."

[Inaba]'s expression was tense, yet resolute, and Taichi waited intently for her to continue.

"...But first, I bet you're hoping I'll start with a joke!"

"Hoping? No, but I had a feeling you were going to!"

Of course.

She was nothing if not consistent, right to the very end.

[Inaba] giggled mischievously. Then, out of nowhere, the laughter stopped, and [her] expression crumpled. "Nngh... Why...? Why the heck are you acting so normal? Everybody else... looked way sadder..."

Obviously Taichi wanted to cry his eyes out like everyone else, but that simply wouldn't do. He needed to be her rock so she could take a break from trying to hold it together.

"Trust me, it's tearing me apart inside... but I know you've got it way worse."

With that, the dam burst, and tears rolled down her cheeks.

She was dying; it would have been far weirder to leave the world with dry eyes, considering all the anguish she must have felt. And yet Nagase had maintained her composure in front of the others—likely a considerate gesture to keep them from hurting any more than they already did.

In her position, Taichi knew he probably would have done the same... but she'd endured it long enough now.

Taichi stepped forward and pulled Nagase—well, more accurately, [Inaba]—into a hug. She was so soft... and warm... and sad.

"Ugh... I really don't wanna die... I wanna keep on living... My life barely even *started*, you know? Why...? Why do I have to die...? What did I do to deserve this...?"

Nagase's bitter anguish flowed with her tears. Meanwhile, Taichi held his own sadness back to make room for hers.

Maybe it was the sort of thing a "martyr" would do... No, that wasn't it. He wasn't doing this to stroke his own ego—but he wasn't sacrificing himself purely for her benefit, either. The line was blurry... Still, a tiny part of him understood.



“You only just confessed your love to me, too...”

A hot lump of emotion welled up in his chest, and he fought it back into a single tear that he refused to let fall. At the same time, his bubbling hatred for «Heartseed» withdrew deep into his heart. He didn’t want to let those dark thoughts taint the most precious moment of his life.

After a long moment, [Inaba] (Nagase) pulled out of the embrace, wiping [her] tears.

“Well... This is the end, so... I’d better go ahead and say it.” She took a deep breath, then exhaled. Then, once she was ready, she looked up at him and smiled, eyes pink and puffy.

He saw the future in that smile. A bright, shining future. An eleventh hour miracle.

“Yaegashi Taichi... I’m in love with you, too. So please... don’t be my boyfriend.”

“Sounds g—Wait, what?”

What was that supposed to mean?

“Hehehe! Well, I’m dying, silly! Ideally you should date someone who... y’know... stays alive.”

“As if I—Mmph?!”

[Inaba] (Nagase) clapped a hand over his mouth to silence his protests.

His heart was being torn in half, bit by bit, slowly, sweetly, gently.

“Instead, I want something to remember you by,” she whispered. “So get over here and kiss me, pal. I’m sure Inaban will understand.”

“Okay then... So... Who will it be?”

For someone who was asking them to decide the ultimate fate for one of their friends, «Heartseed» sure looked bored. The four of them—[Inaba] (Nagase), Taichi, Kiriya, and Aoki—sat silently on a bench, facing it.

[Inaba] (Nagase) got to her feet. “Me. I, Nagase Iori, will die alongside [my

body],” she stated without a trace of hesitation. In that moment, she looked so powerful, and the rest of them could only watch.

“Ah... Well then... That’s certainly a valid option... Oh, but... Is it too late to hope for a miraculous recovery...?”

“Can I just ask you one last thing?” [Inaba] (Nagase) asked, staring down the thing that currently held her life in its clutches. She showed no fear; judging from the look on her face, she had accepted it all and was now choosing to confront it head-on. “What was the point of all this, in the end?”

What was the point of making the five of them switch bodies at random for nearly a solid month, only to kill one of them off?

“...Good question... Regardless... It’s nothing any of you need to concern yourselves with going forward...” «Heartseed» dismissed her question offhand, looking mildly annoyed.

Kiriyama leapt to her feet. “How can we accept th—” she began, but [Inaba] (Nagase) held out a hand to stop her.

“I see. So you’re not going to answer that, huh? Okay, fine. Then let me ask something else. And no, I won’t accept any vague non-answers for this one.” Her bravery was breathtakingly beautiful. “You won’t be doing this to anyone else, right?”

Evidently that was the one thing she wanted to be sure of more than anything else. It was certainly a valid question. A vitally important question, really. Would these awful predicaments just keep happening to them?

But at the same time... why did she care? How could she possibly have the mental bandwidth to care about that when she was knocking on death’s door herself?

[Gotou] «Heartseed» froze for a moment. Its expression didn’t change, but somehow Taichi got the sense that it was a little caught off-guard by this.

“Of course not.” Its words seemed reasonably sincere. “Oop... I guess it’s time.”

They weren’t given even a moment to prepare.

The next instant, [Inaba's body] froze, and then a moment later [she] shook her head. "What the—" she began, but then she caught sight of [Gotou] «Heartseed». "You bastard! Wait... Where's Iori...?!"

With that, Taichi knew that «Heartseed» must have quietly swapped them back.

Right as Inaba began to shout, however, the door to the ICU swung open.

The timing was too perfect. Had «Heartseed» been telling the truth all along?

The four of them gasped and looked through the open door, praying it was all a lie.

Please don't let it be over. Not now. Not like this.

If this is reality, please just let me sleep.

Let me stay in a world where Nagase still exists.

They were desperate.

But the passage of time was unfeeling.

The doctor walked up to them and said—

"Good news: she's through the worst of it now. She's going to be fine."



Taichi and the others stared blankly as the doctor explained that she'd been very lucky, that she most likely wouldn't suffer any subsequent complications, and that she would soon be moved to a hospital room where they could speak to her. Their reactions to this were so muted, the doctor found it a little strange, but evidently decided they must have been too relieved for words, and so finished with a quick "Congrats!" and walked off.

As they all struggled to process this, Inaba was the first to speak.

"What the fuck...?"

"Yes, yes... Good work, everyone," [Gotou] «Heartseed» responded idly, as though nothing particularly noteworthy had happened. "Oh, right... Here, have this... Snack cakes, as a token of my apology... Oh, but... If you'd rather give it to

Nagase-san as a get-well gift, that would be even more ideal... for me, anyway.” It held up the paper bag it was carrying.

Meanwhile, Inaba staggered backwards into the wall, slamming the back of her head with a loud *thud*.

“You got us good... I mean, there was always a chance... Hell, I suspected you might pull something like this... but... GAAHHH! It’s just... AAARGH! What the *fuck*, man?!”

“Wait... what...? So... Iori’s... fine...? She’s... gonna live...?” Kiriyaama breathed the words slowly, like she was savoring each one. Then she buried her face in her hands and began to sob.

“Yeah... She’s gonna live... Th-Thank god... Oh man... It’s kinda hard to stay upright...” Aoki murmured as his body slowly collapsed into a sitting position on the floor.

As for Taichi... he still hadn’t quite processed it. *What just happened? If she isn’t going to die, then how will things work out between the two of us? Do we just... take it slow...?*

“Sorry, Inaba.” All he could do was apologize... and pray that it hadn’t been her first kiss.

“Hey, fucker... How much of this was planned in advance?” an exhausted Inaba asked «Heartseed».

“Well... If I had to say, I suppose... all of it...? I don’t think you people realize just how much I’m truly capable of... I mean, think about it... I can *shuffle your souls around*... Can you wrap your head around that...? Oh, right... I guess it doesn’t really matter if you can or not...”

“So you were never planning to hurt Nagase?” asked Taichi.

Come to think of it, «Heartseed» had gone out of its way to ensure her phone and wallet were in safe hands before it plunged her body into the river.

“...Of course not... I would never do something to ruin an upstanding citizen’s life... though obviously I’m not above causing a bit of trouble... but hopefully my gift of snack cakes makes up for it... Wait... ‘Cakes makes’... That rhymes... Oh,

wait... That doesn't matter literally at all... Anyway, I have no intention of asking for your forgiveness, but I do hope you won't hold this against me... In the end, it was kind of a good thing, don't you agree...?"

For the first time since meeting «Heartseed», Taichi sensed a trace of emotion in that last sentence—so faint, he wasn't entirely sure he hadn't simply imagined it.

"Okay then... I'll be going on home now... Oh, right... I think you all understand this by now, but please don't bother [this fellow] after I'm gone... Wouldn't want to risk further complications going forward... Actually, if you could just cut me a break... or if you could just not think too deeply about any of it... or if you could just completely forget everything... That would be great... Might be asking too much, though... Oh... I went on another pointlessly long tangent... Alright... See you again."

With that, [Gotou's] head slumped to [his] chest, just as theirs often did when switching bodies, and the next moment [he] looked up once more, eyes wide in surprise.

Just like that, the curtain closed on the whirlwind of events that had shaken the foundations of their very lives.

"Huh...? Where am I...? I remember hearing Nagase was in the hospital after falling into the river, so I rushed here in a taxi... Wait, what? I'm already *at* the hospital? Oh, and here's the rest of the CRC! I guess I must have blacked out on my way here... Maybe I was just that desperate to arrive as soon as possible... Holy crap... I'm totally Teacher of the Year material... And what's with this paper bag I'm holding...? Oh, hey, it's strawberry mochi cakes! Wait... Why do I have these...? Oh well. Can't complain about mochi cakes! Oh, right. So anyway, what's Nagase's current conditi—OWWW! Inaba-san! That hurts!"

Inaba had put Gotou in a vicious Cobra Twist.

"Shut the fuck up! This is what you get when you don't think critically, you goddamn shit-for-brains!"

As she spoke, she transitioned to a Goumon Cobra Twist—a much more intense Cobra Twist that involved pressing down on the opponent's head from behind.

Suffice it to say... it wasn't pretty.

Epilogue

—A week passed.

The entity that called itself «Heartseed» was shrouded in mystery and lies, and the CRC never did learn the full truth about it—but at least it was right about one thing: there were no further complications. As such, Nagase made a full recovery and was back to school in no time.

«Heartseed» was so thorough, in fact, it even made sure to put an envelope in the Nagase family mailbox containing what appeared to be enough money to cover all of her hospital fees. (A few days later, Gotou mentioned during homeroom that he'd noticed an unfamiliar entry in his checkbook... but the CRC decided not to worry about it too much.) When Taichi admitted to the others that he didn't think «Heartseed» seemed like an actively malicious being, Inaba scoffed and replied, "Your optimism disgusts me!"

As of today, they were finally free from the hectic drama brought about by Nagase's hospital stay, and for the first time in a solid week, the CRC was back in business... Not that they *had* any business, but still.

School ended for the day, and Taichi handled his assigned classroom cleanup duty, then packed up his things and headed for Rec Hall Room 401. Everyone else was probably there by now.

There hadn't been a single body-swap since that fateful day.

Looking back over the course of the phenomenon, there weren't many memorable moments at all. It was kind of strange, actually, considering how downright bizarre it had been. And yet, the more time passed, the more all the crazy shenanigans started to feel like something out of a waking dream—even though it all definitely happened in real life.

In the end, something far more serious had happened: their world had changed.

The body-swap was a typhoon of destruction, and yet somehow it managed

to help them solve their problems, too. That said, once these problems were brought to light, in most cases, they turned out to be far smaller and more insignificant than they realized... the perfect match for small and insignificant people to confront head-on.

Naturally, there was no guarantee they'd succeed, nor that they'd come out unscathed... but as they say, you never know until you try.

That said, fighting it—confronting it, accepting it, reflecting on it, moving past it—wasn't as easy as it sounded.

Alone, without any help, it would be a challenge... but if they could pull it off, those same insignificant human beings could easily change their whole world.

Granted, maybe their solutions were only surface-level. Maybe they'd always carry the root of those problems deep down.

For example, obviously Taichi's "martyrdom" hadn't been completely cured. It was a part of who he was, and it would likely never change. But at least now he'd come to terms with it.

The body-swap had put the members of the CRC through a lot, and they had irrevocably changed as a result. Fortunately, they had all changed for the better—in Taichi's eyes, at least. They rose to the challenge and succeeded, all because they had the help of their fellow club members to do it.

These days Inaba seemed a little warmer.

Kiriyama seemed a bit more chatty with guys.

Aoki seemed a little smarter.

And as for Nagase, well... these days she and Taichi were both too shy to look each other in the eye...

Ahem. Never mind that.

Anyway, Taichi was really looking forward to seeing them all again. Despite everything they'd been through, he believed that as long as they could still goof off like old times, then that was all that mattered.

...Or maybe that belief itself, ultimately, was all that mattered.

Would Inaba lose her temper over something trivial and smack somebody? Would someone tease Kiriya just to get a rise out of her, and make her blush and shout and flail her arms? Would Aoki handle his role of designated butt monkey with aplomb? Would Nagase torment everyone with a string of dumb jokes, both planned and unplanned, seemingly at random?

Truth be told, it was high time they quit slacking and got to work on their club activity for once—that is, making a “school bulletin” full of biased articles on their hobbies—and yet, at the same time, he knew it probably wouldn’t end up happening today. They would be far too wound up. At least... he hoped as much, anyway.

Now all that was left was to open the door.

He could see it clearly.

The only worry on his mind was the comment Inaba made the other day—“I heard from Iori that you stole my first kiss, eh? Looks like I’ll require some *recompense*... Now, how shall I make you pay...?”—followed by unearthly, spine-chilling laughter.

She probably wouldn’t kill him, at least...

Emphasis on *probably*.

The End

Afterword

Nice to meet you, everyone! My name is Anda Sadanatsu.

This is my first official debut novel after winning the Special Award in the 11th annual Enterbrain Entertainment Awards, Novel Division. So many people helped me get this far, and now as I write this afterword, I'm filled with gratitude towards each and every one of them. Honestly, I couldn't have made it without them.

That said, my editor told me "Just because you're new at this, it doesn't mean you have to fill the whole thing with thank-yous and apologies. That's boring!" So, with that in mind, despite the fact that I'm a total nobody who probably doesn't have any business claiming to be an author, I'd like to tell you all about the many hardships I faced trying to write this book. Nothing's ever easy, after all.

Obviously, I write because I like it. That said, my feelings toward writing are a different kettle of fish compared to someone who's wanted to be a novelist since childhood. Still, writing a book was a goal of mine, and now here I am writing the afterword to said book, so obviously I can't dislike it that much, now can I?

Anyway, so there I was, with this intense desire to write a book for some reason. Now, did that passion last throughout the whole project? Well... No.

Maybe it's easy for people with actual talent, but when you're someone like me, trying to finish an entire book can be like pulling teeth. For whatever reason, I keep hitting these walls where I'm like, "Argh! Goddamn writer's block! Writing sucks!" and from there, my motivation plummets completely. Unfortunately, whining doesn't get the book done—and I'm sure this applies to basically everything—so you pretty much have to buckle down and force yourself to just "get it done."

The thing is, I'm not the kind of person who can just magically pull the motivation to "get it done" out of thin air. So I ended up trying out different

ways to boost my motivation levels, and I found one really exceptional, low-cost, effective method.

Yep, you guessed it—daydreaming!

Stuff like “Woohoo! My book made the bestsellers list and now I’m rolling in royalties!” or “My book sold so well, I’m super-famous and now I’m doing special interviews with all these magazines!” or “Just sold the film rights to Hollywood!” or “Wow, my book’s become a cultural phenomenon!” or “They’re gonna name a literary award after me!” Fantasizing about this stuff (I swear these are just idle fantasies) really gets me hyped up, and I start thinking “Hell yeah! Let’s do this!” (Sorry, I know it’s stupid.)

So yeah, shout-out to my daydreams for helping me through that first draft of the manuscript. I’m sure they’ll be putting in a lot of overtime in the future, too.

That reminds me, right before I submitted that manuscript to the Amateur Novel Awards, I had this great way of blowing off steam while I was writing the last few chapters.

Yep, you guessed it(?)—brainstorming pen names!

Truth be told, I wasn’t that concerned about what pen name I was going to end up with, but I had a fair bit of fun coming up with them.

For some reason, while I was working on the draft that would eventually become this book, I thought it would be kinda cool to take Edgar Allen Poe’s name and kanji-fy it into “Edogawaranpo” (江戸川乱歩) or something like that.

Why, you ask? No real reason. Just because.

And so from there I decided to take the names of people I liked or admired and turn them into kanji-fied pen names. (Again, just as a fun little way to blow off steam.) What happened next? Well, what do you know! All of my name ideas stemmed from pro wrestlers!

...

Okay, I know this might sound kinda silly coming from someone who’s trying to make it as an author, but I figured I wouldn’t be making my professional

debut for a long time anyway, so... I took the name of a certain pro wrestler I admire, and through a series of trial and error, eventually arrived at the pen name I use today. Man, that was fun!

...I didn't expect to be making my debut with this name, though!

Not that I regret it or anything!

Lastly... Just so you know, I'm not a wrestling fanboy or anything. I'm such a casual, it would be extremely presumptuous of me to liken myself to an actual fan! Seriously, the world of wrestling is pretty deep.

Oh, right... You probably don't care. Whoops! Sorry about that!

Now then, on to the acknowledgments!

First, I'd like to thank everyone involved with the Famitsu Bunko department of the Enterbrain Entertainment Awards for giving me the chance to debut as a writer.

Second, I'd like to thank everyone who worked hard to help me get this book published, particularly my editor.

Third, a HUGE thank you to Shiromizakana-sama for making time in her busy schedule to draw the gorgeous illustrations for my book.

And last but not least, the biggest thanks of all go to all of you readers out there. I hope you had a great time from cover to cover.

—Anda Sadanatsu
January 2x1x

Thank you
& congrats!
-Shiromizakana

INABA



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by Sadanatsu Anda

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